

T.H. Brown

Chair Maker

From Mile End South
to the World



BROWN

West Torrens Historical Society Inc.

(G. Grainger, 2023)

*Every effort has been made to provide complete and accurate information,
please advise of any errors or omissions.*

THOMAS HOWARD BROWN



TH Brown (1889 - 1964)

Thomas Howard Brown was born at Telowie (about twenty kilometres north of Port Pirie) on 20 September 1889, the eldest of three children of Thomas Brown (1851-1898) and his wife Mary Ann nee Tuohy (1856-1943).

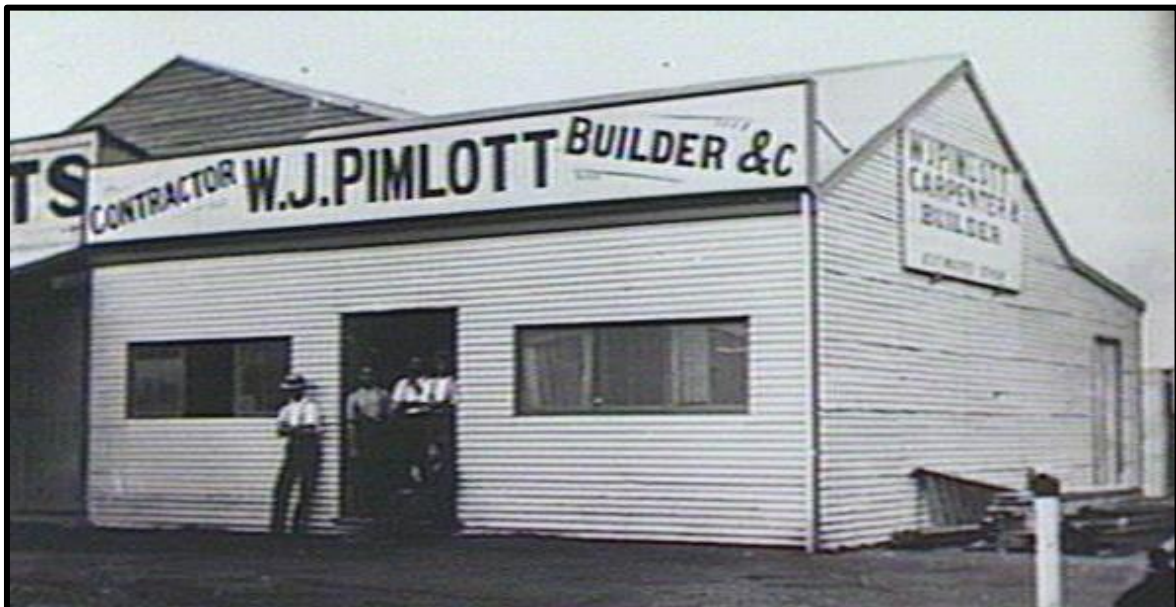
Thomas Brown senior was a pioneer farmer in the Telowie and Beetaloo areas.

Thomas and Mary Ann had fifteen children, only three of whom survived to adulthood, Thomas junior, his younger brother James Leonard Brown and elder sister Shirlock (known as Shirley) Helen Brown.

Thomas junior – who was known for most of his life as either Howard or more commonly by the nickname ‘Brock or Brockie’ – was fatherless from age of eight.

THE CRAFT OF CHAIR MAKING

Always a willing worker, while still at St Mark’s Private School, Port Pirie Brown began working at nights on the wharves. Later he and his brother James (known as Jim) learnt the craft of chair making at W.J. Pimlott’s of Port Pirie.



Factory premises of W.J. Pimlott, carpenter and builder in Ellen Street, 1910 [SLSA B53151]

As a youth Brown moved interstate to further his experience in the business, first at the Melbourne Chair Company of Collingwood, the with Emerson Brothers of South Melbourne and later with Henry Bills and Co. of Launceston, Tasmania. Brown then returned to Adelaide.

In 1910 he received his first commission: a contract from the South Australian Railways to make the narrow board pieces of the serrated wooden valances (decorative displays) which hung from the eaves of the inward and outward goods sheds at the Mile End rail yards.

Brown was paid 1 shilling and ½ pence per board and turned out nearly 40,000 at a rate of 60 per hour on a band saw which he bought on time payment. The valances remained for many years, an elegant memorial to Brown.

In January 1912 Brown began chair making, in his own words, 'in a corrugated iron shed in a backyard in Carrington Street, Adelaide'.

Brown liked to remember that he started out as 'a young man who had £2 14s to his name and spent £2 10s of it on a vertical spindle for chair making'.

STARTED CHAIR FIRM WITH 4/- IN CASH



A young man who had £2/14/- to his name spent £2/10/- of it on a vertical spindle for chairmaking 42 years ago.

It was the start of a firm which is now the largest producer of chairs in the Southern Hemisphere.

Its Hilton plant can produce 100,000 chairs a year.

The machine he bought in 1911 is cherished as a museum piece by Mr. T. H. Brown, often known as "Brock" Brown, of T. H. Brown & Sons Ltd.

He started chairmaking on his own account in a back yard in Carrington street, Adelaide. Then he had a small factory in Halifax street.

He moved to Hilton 28 years ago.

As a boy of 12 at Port Pirie, Brock Brown worked

on the wharves at night during his schooldays.

His sons Napier and Peter are in the business with him. Another son is a surgeon, Dr. J. H. Brown.

There is a remarkable concentration of furniture manufacturing companies in the areas controlled by West Torrens Corporation. This is attributed partly to its nearness to Mile End railway yards.

It is also largely due to West Torrens Council's policy of developing the area industrially.

There are eight furniture companies in the area, plus a firm of upholstery and bedding experts and flock merchants — International Trading Co. Ltd., at Mile End.

MR. BROWN and the machine he bought to start his furniture factory.

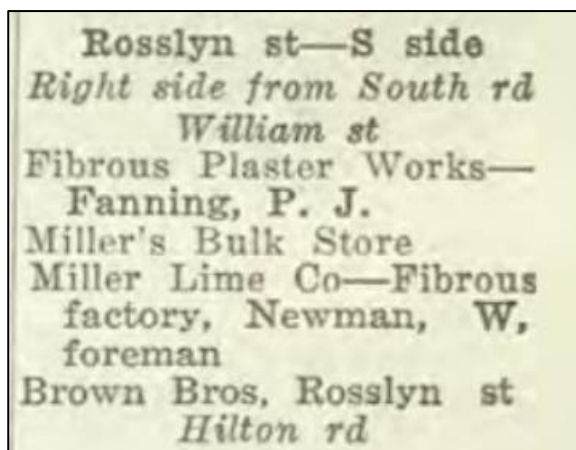
News, 1 December 1953, p13

BROWN BROTHERS

For many years the company held this original spindle as a cherished museum piece. Brown's brother Jim soon joined him in the business, which became known as Brown Brothers Wholesale Chair Manufacturers from 1915 and Brown Brothers Wholesale Furniture Manufacturers from 1928. The company began supplying chairs to furniture and department stores around Adelaide.

In 1914 Brown Brothers moved their business to premises they leased on the eastern side of Stephen's Street, just off Halifax Street, Adelaide. Brown Brothers bought the 0.11 acres/.04 hectares site in April 1918 for £800. In 1920 the brothers shifted their business east to a site on Halifax Street just west of Hurtle Square.

On 22 November 1916 Brown married Elsie Davey née James (1891-1956) at St Francis Xavier Cathedral, Adelaide. They went on to have three sons, Thomas Napier Brown (1917-2004), James Howard Brown (1922-2007) and Peter Francis Brown (1924-2012). From 1921 the family lived at Young Street, Wayville.



Sands and McDougall directory, 1927

In late 1925 Brown Brothers moved their business to a 1.9 acre/0.8 hectare site they bought in August for £750 at Rosslyn Street, Hiltonia (later known as Hilton and from the mid-1940s as Mile End South).

The Rosslyn Street factory covered approximately 300 feet by 100 feet (0.69 acres/0.28 hectares) and was made of wood and iron with jarrah flooring throughout.

Brown was attracted to the site both by its close proximity to the Mile End rail yards – vital in transporting its products to the company's country and later interstate markets – and by West Torrens council's policy of developing the area for industrialisation. Laurence Shegog (1888-1964) was foreman of the factory for many years.

COMPETITION

By the 1950s there were several furniture makers in this part of West Torrens, including E.R. Noblett and Sons of Richmond, the Perry Furniture Company of Hilton, Robb and Wraight Furniture of Manchester Street, Mile End, South Australian Plywood Limited of William Street, Hilton, and the Walker Furniture Manufacturing Co. Ltd of Keswick.



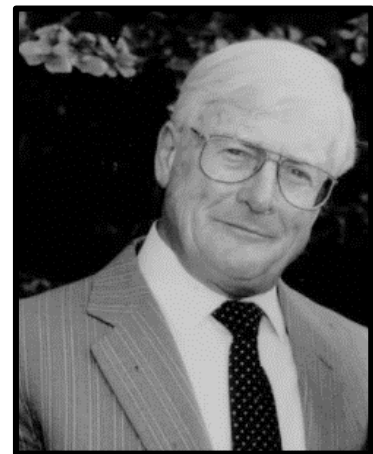
QUALITY = DEMAND

Brown Brothers thrived at Hilton, becoming respected Australia-wide for the outstanding quality and superb style of its products.

The company specialised in making chairs and settees of oak, blackwood, Manchurian oak and maple. Each year from 1912 Brown Brothers increased its output such that by the late 1920s it was producing 4,000 chairs per month. By this time the company employed thirty workers and had a capital value of £15,000. In March 1930 Brown Brothers opened a retail outlet, Brown's Limited, at 66-68 Hindley Street, Adelaide.

T.H.BROWN AND SONS LIMITED

In December 1934, perhaps as a result of a rift between the two, Howard severed all business connection with his brother Jim and renamed the business. A public notice in the Adelaide Advertiser stated bluntly: 'A dissolution of the business having occurred, Mr J. Brown will have no connection whatsoever with T.H. Brown and Sons'. Jim Brown continued to run Brown's Limited until the 1960s.



Peter Brown (1924 - 2012)

Howard's son Napier joined him in the business in the mid-1930s. Both Napier and his younger brother Peter served in the second world war, Napier in the Australian Army (rising to the rank of captain) and Peter in the Royal Australian Navy. After the war both joined the family company. (Middle son James Howard – known as Howard – became a North Adelaide surgeon).

During the second world war Brown and Sons continued its usual work as well as making chairs especially for use in munitions factories and officers' quarters.

1950s EXPANSION

Immediately after the war Brown and Sons discontinued the manufacture of settees and concentrated solely on producing chairs.

The company continued its strong growth, facilitated by the Australian postwar housing boom: Brown and Sons manufactured its one millionth chair in early March 1947. In mid-1947 Brown and Sons took the trade name of T.H B. Chairs, retaining it for about a decade.

Family lore maintains that in the postwar world Brown and Sons was ahead of its time by hiring Indigenous workers, offering English language classes for migrant workers and providing appropriate facilities for staff with war-related disabilities.

In the early 1950s T.H.B. Chairs produced a range of chairs including its 'Norway Fireside Chair', the 'Ladderback' Dining Room chair and its best seller, the 'Comfy' utility chair, 'the all-purpose chair for everywhere'. (By the late 1940s over 120,000 of the 'Comfy' chairs had been produced). T.H.B. liked to advertise that 'there is a T.H.B. chair for every room in the house'. Moreover, 'T.H.B. Chairs are in offices, factories, schools and hospitals throughout Australia'. All T.H.B. chairs came with a ten-year structural guarantee.

By the mid-1950s the company was producing 100,000 chairs annually, they were sold in five states and the Northern Territory and T.H.B. was the largest chair manufacturer in the southern hemisphere.

In 1954-55 Brown and Sons bought an extra 1.25 acres/0.51 hectares on William Street, Mile End South adjoining their factory, for £21,520 (most of the site had previously been owned by the Curnow Furniture Company). The acquisition took Brown's total holdings at the site to approximately 3.22 acres/1.3 hectares

Howard Brown was by now a leading figure in the local furniture manufacturing industry, including serving in the late 1940s as president of the Wholesale Furniture Manufacturers' Association of South Australia. Though still governing director of T.H.B. Chairs, from the mid-1950s Brown took a less active role in running the company.

**T. H. Brown
Buys Curnow's**
T. H. Brown and Sons, Ltd., Hilton chair manufacturers, has bought the adjoining business of the Curnow Furniture Co.
This business will now be administered and controlled by T. H. Brown and Sons, but will continue to trade under its present name.
The new management takes effect as from July 1.
The intention is to extend operations to a full range of cabinet production.

Advertiser, 8 July 1954, p6

'BROCK' BROWN THE SPORTSMAN

Apart from his busy business life 'Brock' Brown was very prominent in South Australian sporting circles.

He was a boxer in his youth and later became a fine lawn bowler, winning the state fours championship and being skipper of the Adelaide Bowling Club 'A' grade team.

He was also president of the club as well as being a member of the Adelaide Oval and South Park bowling clubs and serving for a time on the executive of the SA Bowls Association.



KOoyONGA GOLF CLUB

In 1923 Brown was a foundation member of the Kooyonga Golf Club.



In 1928 he embarked upon a seven-month tour of Britain and Europe, partly to investigate the latest methods of chair manufacture but also to assist Kooyonga's first golf professional, Rufus Stewart, in his attempt to make a name for himself in international golf.

Since the late 1920s the Kooyonga Golf Club has offered the T.H. Brown Trophy as a major award. (Brown's son Howard was also a fine golfer).

STATE CRICKET

Brown employed many state cricketers in his business, allowing them time off to meet their sporting commitments.



Flying Officer, C. W. Williams
[vwma.org.au]

In the late 1940s Brown created and funded the annual C.W. Walker Memorial Award. The trophy, awarded to the state's best district and schoolboy wicketkeepers, was created in memory of Charlie Walker, an outstanding young SA wicketkeeper (and employee of Brown) who died in the second world war. The trophy is still awarded.

Brown was also a member of the boards of S.A. Tubercular Association, Bedford Industries and the Catholic Education Council.

After several months of ill health Brock Brown died in Calvary Hospital, North Adelaide on 23 September 1964, three days after his 75th birthday. After a requiem Mass in St Xavier's Cathedral Brown was buried at Centennial Park cemetery. He was survived by his sons.

NAPIER AND PETER BROWN

After Brown's death T.H. Brown and Sons, now run by Napier and Peter, continued to thrive and remained one of Australia's most respected furniture manufacturers.

Napier Brown became especially active in the running of the furniture industry's affairs, serving for long periods in the 1950s and 1960s as president of the Wholesale Furniture Manufacturers' Association of South Australia and the Australian Council of Furniture Manufacturers. In January 1979 Brown was awarded membership of the Order of Australia (AM) for his service to the furniture industry.

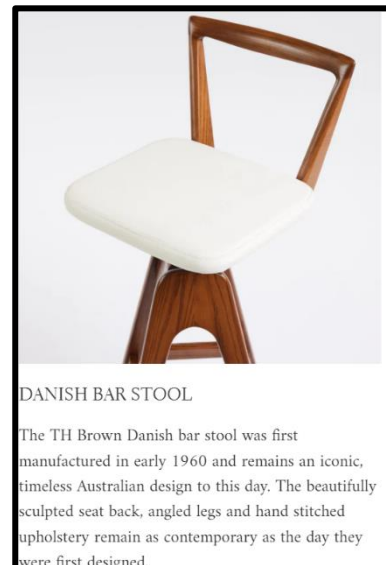
From the late 1950s the company broadened its output, moving over the next twenty years into the manufacture of bar stools, coffee tables, dining tables and lounge suites. Peter Brown was a prime mover in the change, developing a reputation as a highly innovative designer; he is today recognised as one of Australia's foremost Mid Century Modern (MCM) furniture designers.

COLLECTABLE PIECES

Brown's Danish bar stool of the late 1950s was particularly popular. Today original Brown-designed Danish bar stools are his most coveted pieces and eminently collectable, along with many other Brown designs.



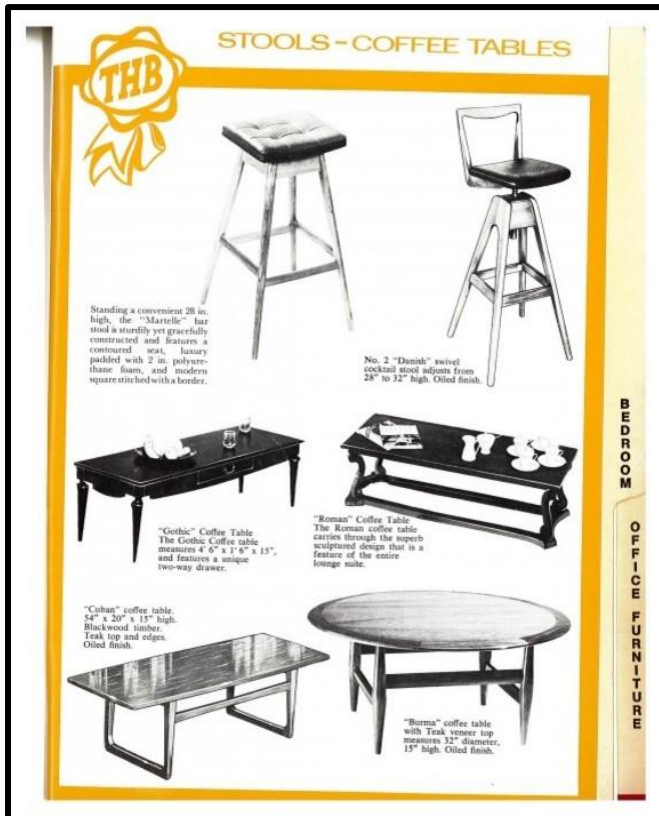
Colonial Dining Room Suite' range, circa 1960s [masterfind.com.au]



DANISH BAR STOOL

The TH Brown Danish bar stool was first manufactured in early 1960 and remains an iconic, timeless Australian design to this day. The beautifully sculpted seat back, angled legs and hand stitched upholstery remain as contemporary as the day they were first designed.

Among Brown's successful pieces were his Burma, Cuban, Gothic, Roman and Venus coffee tables of the mid and late 1960s – the Venus was the most sought after – and his Espana range of armchairs and sofas from the same period.



In the 1970s T.H. Brown and Sons moved into manufacturing a range of other items including sideboards and display and cocktail units. Two Brown and Sons items, reception furniture from the late 1950s and an armchair from about 1960, both designed by Peter Brown, are held by the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Chair making however remained the company's core pursuit. At its peak in the 1960s and early 1970s Brown and Sons was producing almost 150,000 chairs annually and employed three hundred people.

In May 1972 the company became T.H. Brown and Sons Pty Ltd and in July 1987 T.H.B. Holdings Pty Ltd.

WORKSPACE COMMERCIAL FURNITURE

Peter Brown, then CEO, retired in mid-1987 and the company was sold to a new South Australian firm, Workspace Commercial Furniture.

In 1998-2000 Workspace Commercial Furniture moved to a new \$2.15 million, 2.74 hectare/6.77 acre site in Jose Street, Melrose Park.



Workspace, Melrose Park [workspace.com.au]

As the former Mile End South site was being cleared and buildings demolished in mid-2002 there was a brief press brouhaha over whether asbestos on the site had been removed appropriately. (It had).

Today the area is home to the Harvey Norman Commercial Division and several warehouses leased to private businesses.

In 2023 Workspace Commercial Furniture, 'Australia's largest diversified commercial furniture manufacturer', has showrooms in five Australian capital cities and employs around one hundred and forty people.

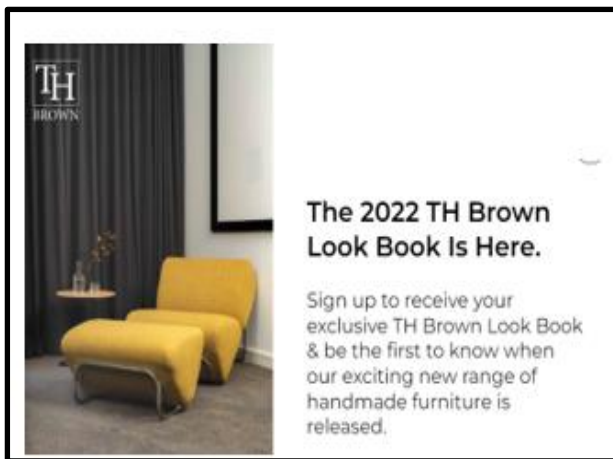
T.H. BROWN TODAY

Peter's son Simon Napier Brown (b.1956) enjoyed holiday employment with the company as a schoolboy in the late 1960s and began full time work there as a sales clerk in 1975.

T.H. Brown and Sons was reborn in February 2017. After many years in Sydney, Simon and his wife Toni from 2017 began to reproduce two of his father's classic designs, the Danish Bar Stool and the Martelle Bar Stool.



Simon N. Brown



Peter Brown-designed coffee tables followed, then in 2022 the Trend Modular Lounge series, originally conceived by Brown in the 1970s.

Rather than exact replicas of the originals the new products are intended as thoughtful evocations of them. Handmade and built with ethically sourced materials, all come with the famous T.H. Brown and Sons ten-year guarantee.

Simon's younger brother Justin is also steeped in design. After working for T.H. Brown and Sons as a schoolboy, in 1978-85 he was the company's chief designer. Working in furniture design for much of his adult life, in January 2015 Justin became the founder and CEO of Office Portfolio, an Adelaide-based company focussing on the design and manufacture of high quality office furniture.

The Brown family's furniture design baton has clearly been passed on.


In 2018 T.H. Brown and Sons was selected as a South Australian Icon by the South Australian branch of the Design Institute of Australia.

RESOURCES

<https://www.thbrown.com.au/pages/th-brown-a-legend-of-australian-design>

COLLECTORS ITEMS

Early examples of its work are widely collected; some are also held by the Art Gallery of South Australia. The company remains one of the most iconic names in Australian furniture manufacture.




TH Brown Danish Bar Stools

\$1,299.00

The TH Brown Danish Bar Stool was originally designed and produced from the 1950s and has easily become one of Australia's most sought-after designs. Handcrafted in South Australia under license of TH Brown, these bar stools are committed to their original, high-quality craftsmanship and each stool comes with 10 years warranty and is numbered with a Certificate of Authenticity.

The TH Brown Danish Bar Stool features fine Italian leather in a number of colours. Premium Ash wood is used to construct and build the elegant frame, which is then complemented four different wood finishes. Measurements: 390mm W x 390mm D x 830mm – 950mm H (630mm – 750mm H to Seat)


[collectika.com.au]



\$295.00

This TH Brown & Sons arm chair sold through iNVISeDGE for \$295 back in 2007. These days in 2019 I value this exact same chair at about \$395. This listing has been uploaded for people wishing to express interest in buying a similar item through iNVISeDGE and for research purposes. We only sell items like this in iNVISeDGE under consignment for experienced dealers- those with a market stall or shop or buy and sell a lot.

[invisedge.com.au]



armchairs, living, seating, sold

TH Brown Armchair (Circa 1950-60s)

1 x Original TH Brown Armchair (Circa 1950-60s)

Stunning original condition TH Brown Armchair in brown tweed fabric. Three button detail on the backrest with some wear marks on both arms. From the 1960s this beautiful piece is perfect for your living room or bedroom space.

[structuredrebellion.com.au]

West Torrens Historical Society Inc

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