

## Isokon Furniture – Modernist Dreams in Plywood

BY MAGNUS ENGLUND

The Isokon Furniture Company was never commercially successful, yet its legacy has stubbornly refused to die and disappear. Even today, this radical collection of plywood furniture is manufactured and used. The main reason is of course the names associated with it: Jack Pritchard, Wells Coates, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy and – more recently – Edward Barber & Jay Osgerby. The genius little Isokon Penguin Donkey, first designed by the Austrian émigré architect Egon Riss in 1939 and marketed by publisher Allen Lane's then new imprint Penguin Books, is particularly popular with younger generations of design students.

Jack Pritchard (1899-1992) was an upper middle-class Brit whose father had briefly been the Mayor of the London suburb of Hampstead around the time of Queen Victoria's death (1901). After his education at Pembroke College in Cambridge, he ended up in 1925 as the marketing manager of Venesta (short for Veneer Estonia), the British subsidiary of A. M. Luther, based in Tallinn. The company had been formed in the 1880s by two Luther brothers, hailing from German immigrants to Estonia, who claimed to be direct descendants of Martin Luther, the religious reformer. The firm was possibly the biggest manufacturer of items made from plywood in the interwar years, and had offices in London, Paris, Berlin, Milan and Madrid as well as Calcutta, India. Their plywood tea chests made Britain their biggest export market, having invented a glue that made the chest waterproof, which kept the tea leaves shipped from India to Britain dry. Besides an office in London, Venesta also had its own wharf and factory at Silvertown, located by the river Thames in East London. The company made furniture, hatboxes, suitcases and even food containers for the British army, all in plywood. A. M. Luther had manufacturing sites in Finland, Estonia and Lithuania, and the preferred wood was Baltic birch, even though it also used other, more exotic woods from around the world.

Jack Pritchard first came into contact with Wells Coates (1895-1958) when the self-taught architect worked on the new BBC head office in Portland Place in central London. Wells Coates used Venesta plywood both for furniture and wall coverings, including the radio recording studios. He had visited the *Paris World Fair* of 1925 as a journalist and seen the groundbreaking pavilion by Le Corbusier (1887-1965). Another visitor to Paris was Philip Morton-Shand (1888-1960), food and wine critic as well as writer for the

*Architectural Review*. Philip Morton-Shand later went to visit the *Stockholm Exhibition* of 1930, where he met the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), who after designing some tubular steel furniture had turned to birch plywood as his preferred material. Philip Morton-Shand decided to set up a company to import and distribute Alvar Aalto furniture in Britain and around the British Empire and named it Finmar (short for Finnish Marketing). The breakthrough came with an exhibition in November 1933 at Fortnum & Mason, a London department store that is nowadays solely known for its fine food, but then also sold clothing and furniture. Jack Pritchard, who was a decade younger than Philip Morton-Shand, was impressed by the *bon viveur* with his knowledge of fine French wines and food, as well as modern design,

and later went on to employ Philip Morton-Shand's fourth wife Sybil Mary Sissons as his private secretary.

Jack Pritchard and Wells Coates had formed a joint company in the early 1930s, first called Wells Coates & Partners but later named the Isokon Furniture Company. The name was Wells Coates' idea and was short for Isometric Construction. By replacing the C with a K, it also alluded to Russian Constructivism. The first products were basic desks and shelving by Wells Coates, as well as a stool made and designed at A. M. Luther but sold under the Isokon name. Wells Coates was not new to furniture design; he had already made tubular steel furniture for PEL, a British company inspired by Thonet in Germany and its designs by Marcel Breuer (1902-1981) and Mart Stam (1899-1986). There was also a small bookshelf with wooden shelves and metal uprights, which was made in Germany but sold by Isokon in Britain.

With the building of Lawn Road Flats in 1933-34, Jack Pritchard and Wells Coates gradually fell out. The main reason was not Wells Coates' romance with Jack Pritchard's wife Molly, as one might think, but chiefly Jack Pritchard's inability to secure enough money to finish the building to the high standard that Wells Coates had been promised. The idea had been that Wells Coates would work with a reduced architect fee against being able to use the project for marketing, "a sort of back-scratching operation" as Jack Pritchard would later call it. By the time the

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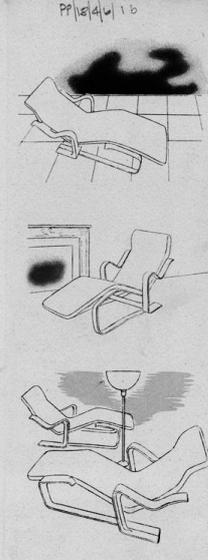
**Those who are familiar with the work of Isokon will recognise in its new Long Chair those features of modern design which have always distinguished its work.**

**This particular chair has only to be sat in to realise that it sets an entirely new standard of comfort, and is a further development of the English tradition of sound useful design, good workmanship, and appropriate materials.**

**From time to time the Company will introduce other interesting designs, and if you would like to be kept informed, please send us your name and address.**

**THE ISOKON FURNITURE COMPANY**  
ISOKON FLATS, LAWN ROAD, LONDON, N.W.3

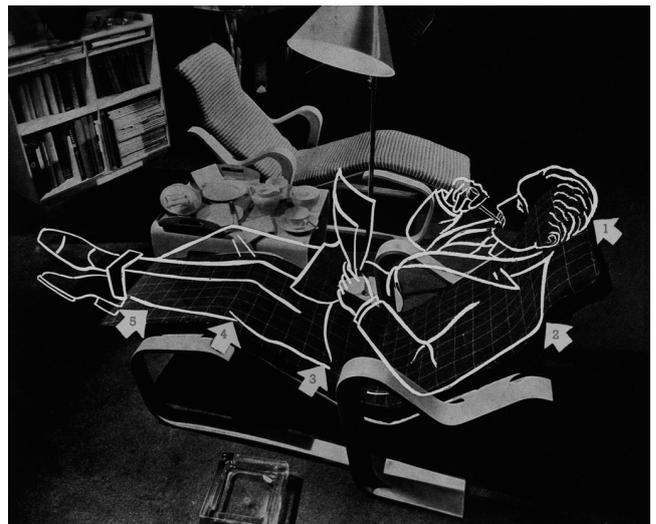
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01 Isokon Long Chair advertisement designed by Moholy-Nagy, 1937. © Pritchard Papers, University of East Anglia.



03 Isokon Long Chair advertisement. © Pritchard Papers, University of East Anglia.



04 Isokon Long Chair advertisement. © Pritchard Papers, University of East Anglia.

building was officially opened on 9 July 1934, Wells Coates was only referred to as “our architect” in the opening speech by Molly Pritchard. Wells Coates felt betrayed and arguments followed about who was to be credited for the idea of Lawn Road Flats.

It was here that Philip Morton-Shand invited Jack Pritchard for lunch at the then-fashionable Trocadero (Walter Gropius (1883-1969) would later hold his farewell dinner at the same location) and suggested that the founder of the Bauhaus was in danger in

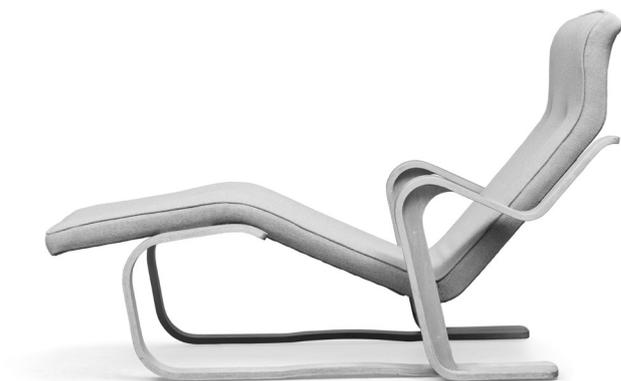
Nazi Germany and needed a home in Britain. Philip Morton-Shand knew that the letting of the Lawn Road Flats had not been entirely successful due to delays in their completion, so he suggested to Jack Pritchard that they offer a flat to Walter Gropius. For Gropius to work in Britain, he needed to partner with a British architect, and Maxwell Fry (1899-1987) eagerly volunteered. After lengthy correspondence between Walter Gropius, Maxwell Fry, Philip Morton-Shand and Jack Pritchard, Walter and Ise Gropius (1897-1983)

finally arrived in London on 18 October 1934 and moved into flat 15 at Lawn Road Flats. In 1935, both Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) also fled to London, staying briefly at Lawn Road Flats.

Besides the architectural work that Jack Pritchard tried to secure for the trio, he also made Walter Gropius “Controller of Design” for the Isokon Furniture Company (the title today would be Creative Director) and Walter Gropius in turn appointed Marcel Breuer as head designer, while László Moholy-Nagy



05 Marcel Breuer, Chair, 1936. © Isokon Plus.



06 Marcel Breuer, Long Chair, 1936. © John Allen Designs, 1970s.



07 Marcel Breuer, Nesting Tables, 1936. © Isokon Plus.



08 Egon Riss, Isokon Penguin Donkey Mk I, 1939. © Isokon Plus.



09 Left to right: Shin and Tomoko Azumi, Isokon Penguin Donkey Mk III, 2003; Egon Riss, Isokon Penguin Donkey Mk I, 1939; Ernest Race, Isokon Penguin Donkey Mk II, 1963. © Isokon Plus.



10 Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby, Loop coffee table, 1996. © Isokon Plus.

was commissioned to create a logotype and sales material. Suddenly, Jack Pritchard had arguably the best modern designers in the world working for him.

It was obvious from the start that the new collection had to be made out of plywood; not only were the British not keen on cold tubular steel furniture, which was already mocked in the press, but also it was the manufacturing through Venesta that Jack Pritchard had access to. The first design by Marcel Breuer was therefore a reworked version of an aluminum chair that he had designed in Switzerland before arriving in Britain, now named the Isokon Long Chair. The chair later proved controversial when Alvar Aalto's newly formed company Artek claimed it was a copy of Alvar Aalto's lounge chair n. 43, forcing Finnmar to pursue the claim against Isokon, but it is a claim without merit as Marcel Breuer's original in aluminum is quite different. There was also a more upright version of the chair – the Isokon Short Chair – as well as nesting coffee tables and dining tables. The attempt to make a dining chair was less successful; while it went into production the design had to be reworked several times, and few survive as the back had a tendency to snap. It was only with the works by Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971) and Ray (1907-1978) & Charles Eames (1912-1988) in the 1950s that the design of sturdy dining chairs in plywood was finally solved.

The furniture was sold both directly by Isokon and through retailers interested in modernism, such as Heal's on Tottenham Court Road, Dunn's in Bromley, Gordon Russell on Wigmore Street and John Lewis on Oxford Street. The department store Peter Jones on Sloane Square even commissioned Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer to design settings for the furniture. Marcel Breuer also made plywood furniture for other companies while in Britain; Crofton Gane in Bristol both asked him to redesign and fill his home, and Marcel Breuer also made a temporary exhibition pavilion for Gane Furniture, which Marcel Breuer many years later claimed to be his best building ever besides the UNESCO building in Paris. Marcel Breuer also did the interiors and furniture for a flat in Berthold Lubetkin's (1901-1990) Highpoint building in Highgate for Dora Ventris and participated in an exhibition at Heal's with furniture designed by seven modern architects. Walter Gropius himself did some less successful designs for the Isokon Furniture Company: a plywood coffee table with a black laminate top, an aluminum wastepaper basket, and attempts to rework the Venesta stool. All of this was clearly below Walter Gropius' talent as an architect and educator, so when Harvard University offered him the position

as Professor of Architecture, he happily left Britain for the USA. Both Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy soon followed him across the Atlantic.

Jack Pritchard was again left without designers for his fledgling furniture company, but in 1939 he commissioned the Austrian Jewish émigré architect Egon Riss (1901-1964) to make a small floor standing bookshelf for his friend Allen Lane (1902-1970) of Penguin Books. Egon Riss had recently moved into Lawn Road Flats, and as always Jack Pritchard desperately tried to find work for continental European émigrés; Egon Riss was tasked with looking after the boiler at the Wells Coates building. The correspondence between Jack Pritchard and Allen Lane is dramatic; by the summer of 1939 they must have known that the outbreak of war was inevitable, yet they discuss how many units to make and how to sell the new design. What they did not know was that as part of the Molotov Ribbentrop pact of August 1939, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia had divided up Eastern Europe in spheres of interest, and that Estonia would be invaded by the Soviet Union. The A. M. Luther factory in Tallinn was confiscated and the Luther family fled to Poland, and then to Germany. The production of Isokon furniture was no more.

After peace in 1945, Britain had a severe shortage of furniture and restrictions on sales and manufacturing, which had started during the war as the Utility Furniture Scheme and continued for several years. Jack Pritchard worked in various governmental bodies involved with raising the standard of British furniture manufacturing, but it was not until his retirement in 1963 that he revived the Isokon Furniture Company, this time with manufacturing in Britain. Marcel Breuer's Long Chair and nesting coffee tables were brought back, and Jack Pritchard also commissioned the British designer Ernest Race to design a new version of the Isokon Penguin Donkey, quite different from its 1939 incarnation. Allen Lane was still at Penguin Books and again agreed to help with marketing. Against a check for six pounds, the little bookshelf was sent out semi flat-packed, with a screwdriver included. This was the most successful Isokon furniture piece ever, and several thousands were made, but by the mid-1970s, Jack Pritchard had fallen out with the manufacturer.

Walter Gropius had passed away in 1969 and Marcel Breuer in 1981, and Jack Pritchard spent his retirement years touring the world, lecturing on the legacy of the Bauhaus, a lonely voice in a world where 1930s modernism had become increas-

ingly unfashionable. It was a meeting with furniture maker Chris McCourt of the London based company Windmill Furniture in 1982 that saved the legacy of Isokon. Jack Pritchard was by then 84 years old, but still determined to see his furniture made. Jack Pritchard passed away in 1992, but Windmill Furniture continued, eventually changing its name to Isokon Plus, the "plus" indicating that they had added more recent designs. In 2003, they commissioned the London based Japanese design couple Shin (1965-) and Tomoko Azumi (1966-) to design the Isokon Penguin Donkey Mk III, while also making the two previous versions. In 2006, two recent graduates from the Royal College of Art, Edward Barber (1969-) and Jay Osgerby (1969-), suggested the Loop coffee table, which became the start of perhaps Britain's now most successful design studio, BarberOsgerby. The Loop coffee table is now in the permanent collection of both MoMA and the Victoria and Albert Museum. After many years in an old Victorian workshop in Chiswick, Isokon Plus is nowadays based in Hackney Wick, East London. Besides relaunching virtually all of the original 1930s Isokon furniture, the company recently won the competition for a new chair for the Bodleian library in Oxford, opened in 1602 and the second largest library in Britain. Again, designed by Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby, the Bodleian chair is an achievement that Jack Pritchard would have been proud of. The Isokon furniture legacy continues.

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Co-founder of the London-based furniture retailer Skandium and the Director of the Isokon Gallery Trust. He has written several books on Scandinavian design. He currently lives in the former home of Jack & Molly Pritchard in the Isokon Building.