

Travels of a desk (and of the successive generations of a family who used it for their writing)

Summary:

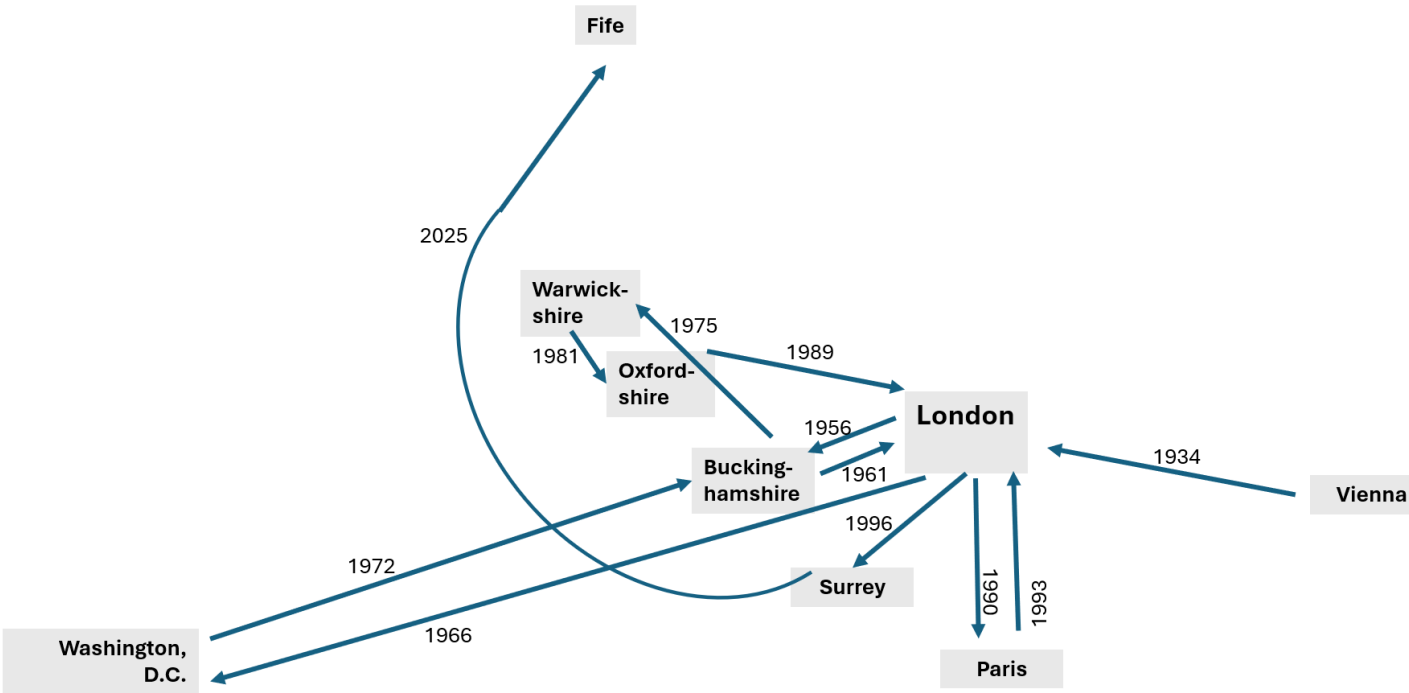
With Hans and Bettina’s Hirsch’s family: 1920s-1947

Used by Fred Hirsch as London single: 1947-56

With Fred and Ruth’s family: 1956-89

With Donald and Christine Hirsch’s family
1989-2025

With John and Lise Hudson’s family 2005-



(Detail below)

Travels of a desk and of the families it belonged to, and what was written on it.

VIENNA

Sometime in mid-1920s, Hans purchased desk, presumably using it as a journalist on *Arbeiter Zeitung*

LONDON

1934: Hans and family moved to London, fleeing political persecution from Fascist regime. Desk shipped – we don't know how. In the following years, Hans used it to write about the oppression of Austrian socialists, his vision for a social democratic future for Europe and many other topics

1934-39: At 24 Harley Road, Swiss Cottage, a house shared with Hugh Gaitskell, who later led the Labour Party.

1939-54: At 72 Canfield Gardens, West Hampstead, run as a boarding house by Hans's wife Bettina, and from 1947 when Bettina returned to Vienna 4 years after Hans's death, by family friend Ella. Hans and Bettina's children, Fred and Anni lived here until 1952, and Fred is likely to have used the desk to write essays in his time studying economics at LSE. Although Fred and Anni moved to bedsits in a house in Primrose Gardens in 1952, the desk stayed put.

1954-56: Fred moved to 13 Boscastle Road, Parliament Hill., sharing with friend Tom Braunthal. He reports the desk being moved there from Canfield Gardens, and must have written articles on it for the Banker and Economist for which he was now working. (See account in Ruth Dudley Edwards' history of The Economist, *The pursuit of reason* (1993) which has detailed extracts from Fred's letters to his mother about experiences as a young journalist.)

RADNAGE

1956-61 Desk relocated to dining room of Fred and Ruth's tiny family home, Lantern Cottage, Bennett End, Radnage, Bucks.

LONDON

1961-66 Family moved to 8 Watery Lane, Merton Park. As well as now being a senior editor on the Economist, Fred used the desk to write his first book, ***The Pound Sterling, A Polemic***, which may have contributed to the dramatic devaluation of sterling in 1967, having been one of the earliest to challenge the "strong pound" orthodoxy of the time .

WASHINGTON, D.C.

1966-72 Family and desk moved to 3421 34th Place NW, with Fred working at the IMF. In this period he spent a lot of time at his desk writing his analysis of the international monetary system, in his book ***Money International***. Two years later, in 1971, the monetary system (dollar standard) collapsed. Meanwhile in DC, Martin Luther King was assassinated, the ghettos burned, we joined the protests against the Vietnam War, we grew our hair and a few days before we left, some burglars were arrested in a hotel/office building downtown called Watergate

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

1972-74 Moved back to England, living in Cotswell, Long Crendon, Bucks. Fred worked both there and at Nuffield College Oxford on his seminal work, ***Social Limits to Growth***, as well as on a book on the power of money in newspapers, ***Newspaper Money***, with David Gordon.

WARWICKSHIRE

1975-81 11 Leam Terrace, Leamington Spa, after Fred appointed Professor of International Studies, Warwick University. Finished off *Social Limits to Growth* and completed ***The political Economy of Inflation*** (edited with John Goldthorpe) just before he died in 1978. That book brought together many of Fred's ideas about how competing interests interacted with economic processes and outcomes.

OXFORDSHIRE

1981-1989 Hillside Wootton Woodstock, with Ruth, who set up a charming home there.

LONDON

1989-90. End of an Era: 101 Inderwick Road, Crouch End: A month before the fall of the Berlin wall, Donald and family bought a house in Crouch End with room for the desk in the bedroom bay window, and Ruth kindly relinquished it.

PARIS

1990-93 20 Rue du Bocage, Sevres,. When Donald got a job at the OECD, writing about comparisons of education systems, the family and the desk came too.

LONDON

1994-96 101 Inderwick Road again. the desk once more came into its own, as Donald set out on a largely home-based freelance career, writing widely on international comparisons of social policy and analysing developments in the UK social security system.

In the 1990s, computerisation had an up-side and a down-side. Email made it possible for the first time to work in real-time from home with colleagues across the world. But on the ergonomic side, the desk was too high comfortably to use a keyboard. A small, lower table in front of it was required..

SURREY

1996-2005 10 Poltimore Road. From the desk here, Donald wrote influential reports on reducing poverty and improving social security, latterly as a professor at Loughborough University working remotely. This work focused on what people need as a minimum, and was the basis for the UK living wage.

Converting the loft to a spacious penthouse study in 1999, Donald made a bold bid to end the desk's travels forever, and to retain for his work the best room in the house. The desk was hauled up before the building of the new staircase, which was several inches narrower than the narrowest desk dimension.

In 2007 Donald's daughter Kate had other ideas. When her brother Will left for university, she was offered his larger bedroom, but preferred the larger still penthouse, which was really more than Donald needed, as the need for storing paper diminished with the advent of electronic documents. And we found that we could get the desk out through the skylight and over the sloping roof. So Will's old bedroom, a floor down, became the new study. But eventually, when Donald retired, he found he had no real practical use for the desk or study that couldn't be provided elsewhere, and found that removing it released a room for visiting grandchildren...

FIFE

2025 onwards 8 Main Street, Strathkinness near St Andrews. Among many relatives offered the, John Hudson was the one to answer the call. Very appropriately, he is Hans's nephew, via Hans's much younger brother Stephen. A history professor at St Andrews, he uses the desk to write about aspects of medieval English law.

Reflection (Donald, 2025): To some extent the things written on this desk have been a miscellany determined by the interests and expertise of its owners. But there have also been overlapping themes, especially between Fred's writing on limits to growth and the dilemmas of affluence, and those of his three children, notably Donald's on poverty and social need, Phil's on social and environmental implications of growth-oriented development and the social dilemmas of commodified land relations, and and Tim's reporting on approaches to valuing nature through concepts such as ecosystem services and natural capital accounting. And Phil's interest in land rights in southeast Asia overlaps unexpectedly with John's study of the legal basis of land ownership in medieval England!

Some of these overlaps were explored at an event in the UK House of Commons in 2017, marking the 40th anniversary of *Social Limits to Growth*. By this time the limits to growth arguments were being focused on environmental constraints, but still with reference to Fred's reflections on the nature and consequences of these limits. Speaking at the event, Donald reflected on the social aspects of need that emerged from his own research. His key point was that unlike in the "positional goods" analysis, contemporary definitions of "need" involve social participation, which brings people together, not just competition in the pursuit of individual consumption. The common ground with *Social Limits*, explored in that debate, was that too many things have been "commodified", leading to excessive emphasis on the economic fulfilment of individual well-being, rather than pursuit of shared goals.

A recording of the full event [is available here](#), including Donald's talk, introduced 10 minutes 20 seconds in. [Here is an article](#) he wrote at the time in Huffington Post, reflecting on the relevance of Fred's work 40 years on. (Both the recording and the article also saved as files in this folder).