

WORDS, BIRDS AND BIRMINGHAM PENS

There are many ways to record words. The long history of writing and writing equipment extends from the use of cuneiform script in Mesopotamia 6,000 years ago, written on clay tablets, to today's computerised tablets. Over the years both systems developed a similar commitment to the use of symbols and icons to enhance understanding. In between, pens in various forms have played a crucial part in the commercial and private lives of generations of people keen to record their activities, impressions and ideas. And Birmingham played a crucial part in the development of pens.

Brian Jones

From Reed to Quill

With the development of agriculture and trade, the need to keep permanent records increased, and with it the search for improved implements and materials to write down transactions and communications. Writing implements, from the early stylus to modern pens, depend for their accuracy on flexibility, durability and their ability to produce legible marks. The quill as a writing tool was much more flexible than the reed pen, and scribes found it easier to make their writing smaller, and rounder than before.

At first the scribes found that by cutting the tip at an oblique angle it was possible to make the letters appear more even in stroke. By the third century AD scribes began to use the primary flight feathers of birds such as geese and swans to make quills.

The first mention of a quill pen occurred in Britain in the fifth century – and subsequent widespread usage led, by the early nineteenth century, to massive imports of feathers.

Some progress in quill pen-making was achieved when Joseph Bramah (1748-1814) invented a machine in September 1809 to produce quill nibs. This made for more efficient use of available feathers. Nevertheless, the days of the quill pen were numbered. The growth of literacy, as well as commercial writing and bookkeeping, during the period 1800-1835, led to an extensive search for more durable pen nibs.

From Quill to Steel

Inevitably the demand for an alternative to the flexible, but fragile, quill aroused the entrepreneurial and inventive minds of Birmingham workers. Renowned for their skill with metal, they began experimenting with the use of steel as a writing implement. A record exists of a rather crude implement produced in 1780 by the manufacturer Samuel Harrison for Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), the scientist and theologian.

Demand for pens continued to increase with improvements in education and, in 1840, a comparatively cheap postal system. Consideration was then given to methods of manufacture, which eventually led to the use of a series of handpress processes and factory production.

Mass Production

The success of mass-produced steel pens was due, in no small part, to the inventiveness of John Mitchell (1798-1854). It was he who, in 1822, having observed the handpress production of items of small metalware, such as buckles and buttons, in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter adapted the principles to pen production. Others added improvements.





A display of nibs from William Mitchell for the Paris Exhibition of 1900.

Among the pioneering entrepreneurs of steel pen nib production were also William Mitchell (1806-1845), the brother of John Mitchell, Josiah Mason (1795-1881) and Joseph Gillott (1799-1872). They had much in common: roots of poverty and limited education, but also engineering skills, entrepreneurial ability and a paternal management style, born of opportunities offered in the industrial atmosphere of the nineteenth-century West Midlands.

In the early days, the availability in the Black Country of the raw materials of steel production for the pen trade (coal, iron and limestone) and the presence of canals, for transporting materials and assisting in the distribution of goods, were additional advantages – although eventually all the steel came from Sheffield.

Early pens were so simple that even small manufacturers were encouraged to produce models and invent improvements. At one point there were over 130 steel pen manufacturers in Birmingham. By the end of the nineteenth century, due to amalgamations and bankruptcy, only twelve large manufacturers remained. However, between them, they had developed Birmingham into the world centre of steel pen production.

Economic, Educational and Political Effects

Steel pens rapidly superseded the quill. They were very much cheaper to buy, which made them available to the increasing number of working-class people who had acquired the skill of writing. Many of these people had

been in danger of losing this skill when they left school, as pencils were expensive and slates were cumbersome to carry and impossible to post.

Steel pens could be bought by anyone; in the 1860s, they cost as little as a shilling (5p) a gross (144), whereas quills had cost a shilling (5p) each and great skill was needed to repair them.

The small and humble pen nib had a democratising effect on the population of Britain, enabling working people to become more literate. Paradoxically, the Factory Inspector's reports in the Childrens Employment, Parliamentary Papers 1864, XIV, gave ironic examples of children employed in the pen trade who were semi-literate if not illiterate. The situation was to change over the following decades with improvements in education.

Fortunes made in the pen trade by Josiah Mason and Joseph Gillott contributed much to the educational and cultural life of Birmingham. They appeared to define themselves culturally by advocating perseverance, hard work and responsibility for others; principles enshrined in non-conformist Birmingham by the 'civic gospel'. Mason founded his Science College in 1880, which formed the nucleus of the University of Birmingham and Gillott established an art collection and supported many impoverished artists.

Advances in reading and writing among working people enabled movements such as the Birmingham Political Union to communicate with its membership. Its success in mobilising public opinion contributed to placing political reform on the agenda in the nineteenth century and led to the eventual enfranchisement of the working classes.

Historical, Political and Literary Associations

Many historical, political and literary figures are linked to the Birmingham pen trade, either named among the 100,000 varieties of nibs produced – as in the famous Waverley nib of MacNiven & Cameron named after Scott's novel, or mentioned in the advertisements of leading manufacturer Brandauer – as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, William Makepeace Thackeray and others were.

The trade also recorded historical events, with leaders such as Bismarck, Nelson and Queen Victoria appearing on a range of pen nibs. All convey the diverse and global image of the Birmingham pen trade.

Worldwide Influences

It would be wrong to see the large-scale employment of 8,000 people – men, women and children – in factories predominantly in the Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham as a purely local phenomenon. The pen trade's influence was worldwide, not just as a result of massive exports, but through the presence in many countries of agents, partners and contacts.

Many of the entrepreneurs travelled abroad and some of the companies, such as Brandauer, Leonardt and Myers, were established by people from central Europe. Birmingham manufacturers provided most of the steel pen nibs made and used in the world. ●

Brian Jones MBE MA is a founder member of the Pen Museum, Birmingham. Visit www.penroom.co.uk

Further Reading

Donald Jackson, *The Story of Writing* (Tavolara Publishing Co., 1994).

Brian Jones, *Josiah Mason 1795 – 1881 – Birmingham's Benevolent Benefactor* (Brewin Books, 1995).

Brian Jones (ed.), *People, Pens and Production – in the Birmingham Steel Pen Trade* (Brewin Books, 2013).

Colin Giles Collection, Pen Museum Archives, Birmingham
www.penroom.co.uk