

JOHN SHELDON:

MASTER OF MANUFACTURE AND INNOVATION

Brian George

John Sheldon (1802-1863) was an outstanding toymaker, pencil maker and silversmith, who lived and worked in Birmingham during a period of dramatic industrial growth. He went from humble beginnings to manufactory owner, increasing his fortunes by applying his ingenuity and inventiveness to a diversified and unique product range of writing equipment and plated tableware for home and overseas markets.

Meeting Growing Demand

The first mention of John Sheldon in Birmingham is in *Wrightson's Directory* of 1820 as Sheldon & Co, 57 Lichfield Street. By 1835, having briefly entered into a partnership which he then dissolved, he had moved to larger premises at 38 Lancaster Street, Birmingham. He was forward-looking and keen to capitalise on an expanding world market for writing equipment, which was being created by rapidly increasing trade, literacy and travel.

He concentrated on manufacturing the complete range of portable writing equipment required by the lady, gentleman, businessman and traveller, which could be carried in the pocket or the handbag or used within the household. The key to his sales success lay in his offering wide variety to suit individual preference.

At the same time as demand for writing equipment was growing, George Elkington (1801-1865), in 1841, perfected a silver electro-plating process which opened up a new market for tableware. Looking ahead, Sheldon re-located to larger premises at 55 Great Hampton Street in 1846 and incorporated the manufacture of a full range of plated tableware into his business.

A Pioneer of Advertising

With the rise in literacy, advertising in printed form became an important factor in increasing sales. John Sheldon pioneered this approach with a full-page pictorial advertisement in *Pigot's Directory* in 1835 promoting his pencils and pens. Thereafter pictorial advertisements describing his latest innovative writing equipment regularly appeared in nationwide directories and newspapers.



John Sheldon's unique range of writing equipment.

JOHN SHELDON,
(Late Sheldon and Smith),
No. 38, LANCASTER-STREET, NEARLY OPPOSITE LENCH-STREET,
Birmingham,
**MANUFACTURER OF STEEL SPECTACLE CASES,
TOBACCO BOXES, TINDER BOXES,
PORTABLE FIRE STEELS,
Gun Shot Charges, Percussion Cap Primers, &c. &c.**
ALSO OF STEEL PENS, PEN HOLDERS,
GERMAN SILVER, MUSIC, AND METAL PEN AND PENCIL CASES OF ALL KINDS,
ON THE MOST IMPROVED PRINCIPLES.
THE FOLLOWING ARE A FEW OF THE MOST ADMIRABLE PENS AND CASES, WHICH HAVE MET WITH
THE DECIDED APPROBATION OF THE PUBLIC.

An Improved and very superior GERMAN SILVER PENCIL CASE (including a Reserve for Leads and Pens), more portable than any ever manufactured.

1 2 3 4 5 6

An Improved and very Portable GERMAN SILVER PENCIL CASE, adapted for the Semi-Lunar Pen, with Patent Point, and Reserve for Leads.

No. 1.—The GEYTINGE APPROVED PERUVIAN THREE-SLIT. The qualities of this Pen are well known, and recommended for its general utility and portability.

2.—The RUDOGRAPHIC THREE-SLIT. This Pen, which has been some time before the Public, is chiefly recommended on account of its elasticity and durability.

3. and 4.—The SEMI-LUNAR and INVITATION QUILL METALLIC PENS, possess all the advantages of Steel Pens in general, and are superior to them in their Elasticity, in which they resemble the quill, more than any other ever made; this is the result, in the SEMI-LUNAR, of the slit being circular, by which means the elasticity is increased, without the strength of the metal being lessened; and in the INVITATION QUILL, by a peculiar process, which renders the metal more pliable, without in any way diminishing its substance. The SEMI-LUNAR PEN is furnished with a cavity, sufficiently large to hold ink enough to write a moderate letter, without the least danger of blotting the paper, which circumstance induces many individuals to give it the preference. These Pens are made also with wide points for engraving.

5.—The CHRONOGRAPHIC. This Pen, which is peculiarly adapted for Mercantile use (from its retaining a large portion of ink) is much admired for its cleanness and freedom of writing, and at the same time is found sufficiently elastic for general purposes.

6.—The CHRONOGRAPHIC. This very light and easy Pen, which has all the advantages of No. 5, is preferred by some as being more elastic in consequence of the aperture near the point.

* * * The Manufacturer feels considerable pleasure in saying that he has the satisfaction of receiving the orders of individuals (highly respected in appropriate their society) both at home and abroad.

The above may be obtained through the medium of every respectable Bookbinder, Stationer, Printer, and Merchant in the United Kingdom.

all orders for Home, or Foreign Exportation, executed with the utmost punctuality and dispatch.

Sheldon's first full-page advertisement in
Pigot's Directory, 1835.

Sheldon claimed to be 'a manufacturer of pencils & penholders in endless variety' made in gold, silver and nickel silver with casings finished 'hand engraved, engine turned, reeded, line & dot, barley corn or electro plated' and cast finials with 'inset stone, chequered, engraved or plain end'.

He made a point of informing readers in his advertisements that all items he manufactured would be marked JOHN SHELDON or J SHELDON and where appropriate include the Registered Design number and Birmingham assay mark.

Ingenious Equipment for the Traveller

Sheldon's supremacy in producing writing equipment for the traveller is epitomised in the trio of objects: *Patent Unique Pocket Companion* RD 1086 Registered 8 February 1842; *Patent Pocket Escriptoir* RD 66 Registered 16 November 1843; and *Pocket Telescopic Letter Balance* RD 27500 Registered 13 May 1853.

The *Patent Unique Pocket Companion*, top of the pencil range, was described as 'Multum In Parvo' (much in little). It included a slide-out pen, pencil and toothpick incorporating a half Sovereign counterfeit gauge. At the opposite end a screwed casing concealed a reserve of

www.historywm.com

leads, a two-ounce letter balance and Sovereign, crown and half-crown check weigh. Graduations were also available in kilogram, lot, cents, tola or anna to reflect the area of world influence where they were used. Other variants included a knife replacing the toothpick.

The *Escriptoir*, described as 'The Cabinet of the Million and Wonder of the Age', was a miniature writing desk containing all the essentials for writing. The standard *Escriptoir* was offered in six sizes ranging from three inches by two and a half inches to six inches by four and a half inches, covered in plain burgundy or dark green morocco leather and bearing the Royal Coat of Arms in gilt on the outside of the lid. An outer protective cover in plain or superbly illuminated morocco leather was provided for the smaller sizes to slide into. The larger sizes had a plain morocco case or additional hinged compartment on the lid containing up to fifty sheets of paper and envelopes. The inside of the *Escriptoir* lid contained an almanac giving Postage Rates, Bills of Exchange, Moveable Feasts, Law Terms and Eclipses. A small clip inside held a blotting card and a memorandum pad. The metal compartments were marked Wax Lights, Inkstand, Sealing Wax and Twelve Inch Measuring Tape with Plain and Chequered Seal. The inkstand and wax light compartments were hinged and raised forward to an upright position. The central compartment contained two wax tapers. A separate compartment, on which rested a slide-out penholder embodying a graduated letter balance, was marked Pens. A further unmarked recess contained a piece of India rubber and wafers. When sold, the *Escriptoir* came with nine steel pens, fifty gummed or medallion wafers, three sticks of sealing wax, two tapers and fifty wax lights. Variants included the measuring tape being replaced by a more economical penholder or japanned finish instead of leather.

The *Pocket Telescopic Letter Balance*, weighing letters up to three ounces, was produced with the same variants in material, finish and graduations for world monetary and weighing systems as the *Patent Unique Pocket Companion*.

To complete the portable range Sheldon manufactured a variety of dip pen holders, made in gold, silver, ebony, ivory, pearl, porcupine, bone or wood, plus twenty-five steel and union gold pen nibs all claiming elasticity and durability, with names such as Peruvian Three Slit, Semi-Lunar and Double Damascus.

Changing the World

Altogether John Sheldon registered ten designs between 1841 and 1853 and four Birmingham silver assay marks between 1841 and 1856. He continued manufacturing until retiring to Soho Hill in 1860, having sold the business to Messrs Derry & Jones. He died in 1863 and was buried in Key Hill Cemetery, Hockley – having made a significant contribution to the expanding world of written communication. ●

Brian George is a member of the Writing Equipment Society and researches John Sheldon.

Further Reading

Kenneth Bull, *The KCB Collection* (SC (Sang Choy) International Pte Ltd, 2012).

Brian George, *John Sheldon: A Birmingham Master of Manufacture and Innovation* (The Pen & Pencil Gallery, 2009).

Brian George, 'John Sheldon's Non Registered Designs', *Writing Equipment Society Journal*, Winter 2010.

Brian George, 'John Sheldon's Patents', *Writing Equipment Society Journal*, Autumn 2002.



John Sheldon: toymaker, pencil maker and silversmith, 1855.

© Brian George