

# An Introduction to "Tunbridge Ware" Writing Equipment

The term "Tunbridge Ware" has been applied to various types of woodwork during the last three centuries or so, but has more recently become synonymous with the forms of mosaic decoration developed from the late 1820s.

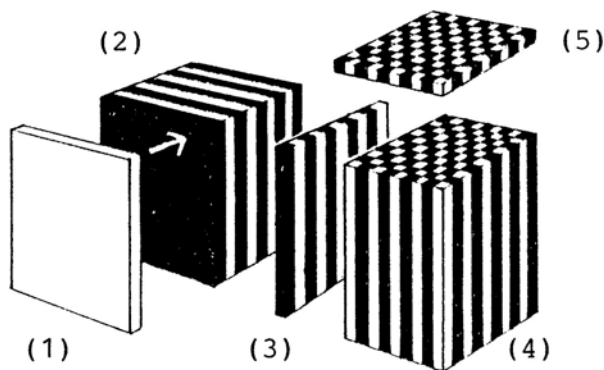
The growth of Tunbridge Wells as a Spa Town backed by Royal Patronage helped to provide the original market for the local woodworkers. As the roads in Britain improved, so the numbers visiting the Spa towns to take the curative waters grew. In due course development of our railways provided yet more people with the opportunity to travel easily and, of course, the desire to travel was stimulated by rising standards of education.

Education generated a demand for writing equipment, and travel for souvenirs to provide something to remember the place by, or as a gift for those back home. Here then were the markets for Tunbridge Ware writing equipment throughout the reign of Queen Victoria.

Earlier forms of decorated woodware gave way in the early part of the nineteenth century to vandyke and cube pattern inlays which initially formed the main part of the decoration, but were later combined with mosaic banding. Stick ware (turned from blocks composed of different coloured woods of triangular and diamond section) and articles with 'half square' inlay (veneers cut from similar blocks across the pattern) were also popular in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The invention of the mosaic technique, attributed to James Burrows, one of the family of Tunbridge Wells woodworkers, was quickly taken up by other manufacturers in the 1830s and it is articles with this mosaic finish which are best known today as Tunbridge Ware. The mosaic technique facilitated a sort of craft mass production and gave a great boost to the local industry.

To produce a mosaic inlay, patterns were worked out on squared paper in colour or copied direct from Berlin woolwork patterns. The design was then either transposed onto an enlarged chart on which each square was assigned its wood (indicated by an initial or a code letter) or instructions were written out listing the woods to be used, line by line.



The different coloured woods were prepared as slips (1) - long narrow pieces, each measuring 6" x 1" x 1/16". The bandmaker then selected slips according to the first column of his chart and glued them to form a block (2). From this he could cut some ten slips of the same dimensions as the first, but striped (3), with the design of the first column appearing as a series of tiny squares at the narrow end. By assembling each column in the same way he had only to glue together one slip from each to construct a

block (4) with the whole pattern on its face. He could thus assemble ten identical blocks six inches long, and from each could cut about 50 slices (5) of patterned veneer. With large designs, particularly those depicting topographical views, the motif was divided into sections, sub-blocks were produced and these joined to form the main block.

Obviously, accuracy of cutting and gluing was crucial to the whole production technique. One can but marvel at the standard of workmanship and quality of the finished product bearing in mind the relatively low quality saws and animal glue which was used.

Of the 180 or so woods used, many were native to the district, others were imported. These gave a wide variety of shades, including green. Only natural colours were used in the manufacture of Tunbridge Ware, in contrast to Sorrento Ware, which is often of similar general appearance but incorporates dyed woods.

The mosaic type of Tunbridge Ware appealed very much to Victorian tastes and the industry enjoyed considerable prosperity. All sorts of articles were ornamented with the mosaic pictures and geometric designs, from stamp boxes to chairs and tables.

The mosaic pictures range from small flowers to large and intricate views of well known buildings. Amongst these, the Pantiles in Tunbridge Wells and the castles and abbeys of Sussex and Kent were most popular. A typical picture of a building would be made up of thousands of small pieces of wood graded, on some articles, to illustrate every stone on the facade.

Although the souvenir element is strong in some designs, all of the articles produced were of utilitarian value. Tea caddies and work tables and work boxes (filled with sewing items, all intricately decorated in the mosaic) were popular but altogether, writing equipment may well provide the largest group of items, both in terms of variety of items produced and also in the total quantity.

Tunbridge Ware vies with Scottish Tartan Mauchline Ware for the first production of Stamp Boxes after Rowland Hill introduced the famous penny post in Britain on the 6 May 1840. Existing designs were quickly 'adapted' to provide containers for the new 1d black, 1d red and 2d blue stamps which were quite expensive at the time and needed looking after.

So, it could be that one of the Tunbridge Ware makers actually invented the 'Stamp Box'. Some of the earliest stamp boxes had real stamps glued on to existing designs of small snuff or other box. However, as real stamps were expensive, facsimile stamps were often used.

Whether real or facsimile, the stamps were varnished over with all the layers of varnish generally applied to the mosaic, thus protecting the paper stamp and providing an attractive hard wearing finish.

Very soon, bespoke stamp boxes appeared, many with beautiful replica 1d black stamps made entirely of mosaic. The shading of Queen Victoria's head on some of these is quite exquisite with such tiny mosaic that there are over 1000 pieces on the head alone. The consistent quality of mosaic veneers produced from a block makes it possible today, perhaps 150 years after manufacture, to identify stamp boxes made from the same block.

In Appendix II, I have listed 30 different items of writing equipment that I know to have been made and decorated in Tunbridge Ware mosaic. For most of the items listed, there were numerous different designs. These range from small items such as the penholder, paper knives and stamp boxes illustrated here to the beautiful rosewood writing slope sold at Sotheby's last year for over £1500. This fine piece had a lid inlaid with a mosaic panel depicting Hever Castle with floral bandings, concave sides and a complete fitted interior which included two glass inkwells with mosaic caps.

Relatively few Tunbridge Ware articles are marked with the maker's name and some makers do not appear to have labelled any of their products. In this latter category is Henry Hollamby (1819-95), to whom the very finest mosaic Queen Victoria head stamp boxes are generally attributed. Makers whose names do appear on the boxes of appropriate articles include the second George Wise (1779-1869), Edmund Nye (1797-1863) and Thomas Barton (1819-1903).

Three Tunbridge Ware manufacturers exhibited at the Great Exhibition in 1851 and production of fine articles continued in many different family firms for some decades after. By the end of the Victorian era, however, the great days of Tunbridge Ware were over. Apprentices were harder to come by and the great craftsmen of the mid-nineteenth century found few competent successors.



Ruler on right is half-square mosaic. Circular 'snuff box type' stamp box has stickware decoration. Larger paper knife has handle of cube pattern mosaic of many different woods including coconut and one green piece. Remaining stamp boxes, paper knife, pen holder and ruler finished in standard mosaic.



Early stamp boxes with portrait heads of Queen Victoria in mosaic down to 0.015" (note box on right has sides decorated with triangular parquetry pieces known as vandykes). Approx 3/4 full size.

By 1902 there was really only one surviving firm, that of Boyce, Brown and Kemp and the quality of its work continued to deteriorate. After changing hands several times, it was forced into liquidation in 1927. Thomas Green purchased some blocks and veneers from the firm and assisted by Richard Kemp, a son of one of the original Boyce, Brown and Kemp partners, revived the craft in Rye in the 1930s calling his produce 'Rye Mosaics', but his premises were destroyed during the war and he never attempted to re-open the business.

Although the mosaic finish of Tunbridge Ware is easily damaged, very many beautiful pieces have survived and are much sought after by collectors. The finest collection is in the Municipal Museum at Tunbridge Wells. Here you will see most of the items of Writing Equipment listed in Appendix II and have the opportunity to hear much more of the fascinating history and methods of manufacture.

#### APPENDIX I: FURTHER READING

Brian Austen, *Tunbridge Ware and Related European Decorative Woodwares*, W Foulsham & Co Ltd, 1989

Margaret A V Gill, *Tunbridge Ware*, Shire Publications Ltd, 1985

Edward H & Eva R Pinto, *Tunbridge and Scottish Souvenir Woodware*, G Bell & Sons, 1970

#### APPENDIX II: TUNBRIDGE WARE ITEMS OF WRITING EQUIPMENT

Blotter Books	Pen Wipers
Book Markers	Pencils
Cylindrical Rules	Pencil Boxes
Desk Boxes	Pencil Cases
India Rubber Boxes	Propelling Pencils
Ink Pots	Rulers
Ink Stands	Seal Boxes
Letter Holders or Racks	Sealing Wax Outfits
Letter Scale Bases	Stamp Boxes
Nate Books	Stationery Boxes
Paper Knives	Taper Holders
Paper Weights	Writing Boxes
Pen Holders	Writing Cases
Pen Racks	Writing Desks
Pen Trays	Writing Slopes

#### APPENDIX III: PLACES TO VISIT

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery (Pinto Collection)  
Chamberlain Square, Birmingham

Tunbridge Wells Municipal Museum  
Civic Centre, Mount Pleasant, Tunbridge Wells, Kent