

## Early Knitting Needle Packaging

By Susan Webster

### Part 1 – Origins in the UK

In comparison with the wealth of documented data about sewing needles (lots of it in *Needle Notes*), there is a very limited amount of published data on knitting needles and other knitting tools. The good news is that most early knitting needles were produced by the same firms that made sewing needles or pins. However, in Britain, knitting never enjoyed the social cachet of other needlework arts, so the humble knitting needle received less attention and publicity.

Written references indicate that most hand knitting up to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was created on metal “wires”. Wood, bone, ivory, and whalebone were, of course, also available; but had a disadvantage for the developing middle class in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: they could not easily be fined down to a diameter that would produce delicate knitted items, particularly those so popular with society ladies and the aspiring middle class.

So, nineteenth-century ladies who knitted as a social activity, as well as those women and men who knitted from economic necessity, continued to use metal wires; and this article is about early marketing and packaging of double pointed knitting needles. We’ll leave the single points for another article.

Up to about the mid-nineteenth century, metal knitting needles were a commodity sold in bulk, or by individual item and could be purchased from a cutler or a haberdasher or a purveyor of other needlework equipment. What did they cost? In 1728 Richard Latham, an English farmer and the father of a young family, noted in his account payments book that he paid one-half penny for a pair of knitting needles. This seems to be a pretty steady price, for he noted in 1735 that he paid 1-1/2 pence for three pair of needles (“one pr stolen”).<sup>1</sup> The price had not changed much by the early nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Looking at cost from the retailer’s side, the 1729 will of a petty chapman (pedlar) valued his stock of “one pound & a half nitin needles” at six pence.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, it is not stated how many needles made up one and a half pounds.

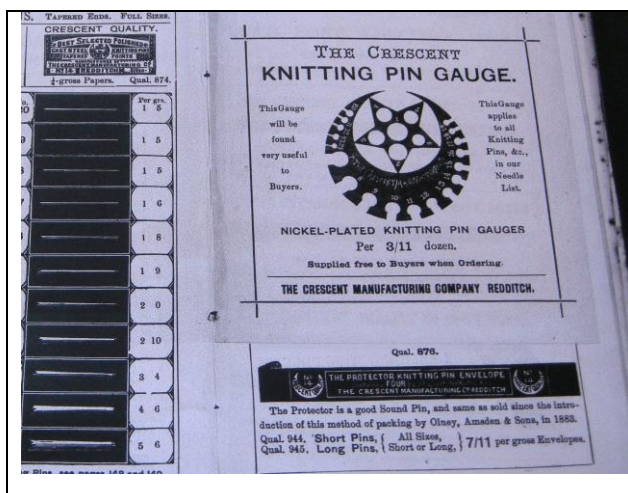


Figure 1 – Olney Amsden’s 1888 catalogue open to show the black Protector Knitting Pin Envelope near the bottom of the page, with the statement “the Protector is a good Sound Pin, and the same as sold since the introduction of this method of packaging by Olney Amsden & Sons, in 1883.” (Note, too, the tipped-in half page above with a graphic of the firm’s Crescent knitting pin gauge and the various sizes of double-pointed needles shown on the facing page.)

The earliest reference I have found to a knitting needle brand is in W. Carter’s *The Royal Victoria Knitting Book*, published in 1851, which recommends “Walkers needles (English size 22), and Manlove’s crochet thread” for Pattern 80 for a baby’s cap.

These needles would not have born the Walker name or any type of logo, and would have been the same unbranded metal double point needles that had been used for centuries. There is no indication that these needles were sold in any packaging, so they were probably sold loose. Henry Walker was, of course, a well-known early manufacturer, merchandiser, and advertiser of needlework tools, starting in the manufacture of sewing needles in the 1820's. His business grew to include a warehouse (retail establishment) in London; and he produced his own almanacs, which noted that his warehouse offered "a wide range of goods besides [sewing] needles".<sup>4</sup>

Packaging of knitting needles seems to have developed much later than packaging and branding of sewing needles – it appears that the earliest sewing needle packaging came from just before the 1820's, while the earliest knitting needle packaging for which I have references was in the 1880's. The 1888 catalogue of the Olney Amsden haberdashery warehouse included a line drawing of a black paper needle packet for a set of 4x dp needles, "The Protector Knitting Pin Envelope". The catalogue stated that the firm introduced this method of packaging in 1883.

Rust and staining were great problems with metal knitting needles, just as with sewing needles, before the development of stainless steel (so well named !) and nickel plating. So, early packaging – as with sewing needles – was designed to combat this problem. The Protector and most other paper packets had a special tissue paper inside the sturdier packet to keep needles dry and rust-free. Even in the early 1900's, John James & Sons were still reassuring retailers that "Each set of Pins is carefully wrapped in Needle Paper before being placed in the Envelope. The Envelopes are made on the Factory, of special paper, and are guaranteed Dry."

Other manufacturers boasted of their own efforts to protect their pins. Abel Morrall, some time after it took over the Lewis & Baylis Cross Fox brand in 1898, noted on their black paper packet that it was the "SAFETY Stitched Envelope" with patent number 19185. In fact, there seemed to be almost as many patents granted for packaging as for innovation in the needles themselves – not surprising since the needles changed very little, and the packaging comprised most of the brand difference.

The cream paper packet seems to have been a later development, and the earliest reference I have to a cream packet with printing of a single colour ink is early twentieth century. The special "Needle Paper" began to disappear in the 1920's, as "rustless" metals came on line – stainless steel, nickel-plated steel, chrome and aluminium.



*Figure 2 – This packet of Tower brand double-pointed needles was sold some time after 1915. The tuck-in tab on the right gives the manufacturer's name as Morris & Yeoman Limited; the firm incorporated in 1915.<sup>5</sup>*

Knitting needles were still sold loose or unbranded well into the twentieth century. The large wholesaler I & R Morley in their 1901 catalogue offered many well-known brands of sewing needles, yarns, etc. But all knitting needles were offered unbranded. Morley's was also still offering size 24 knitting needles – the smallest size I know (sizes 25-28 on early needle gauges were for crochet hooks). However, many other ways of containing and protecting needles were being developed. Other early materials used to package and brand knitting needles included waxed or oiled paper and cellophane. As well, several other types of packaging were used through the early twentieth century. Reasons behind these choices again seemed to be preservation from rust, and also the desire to establish a superior market niche.

Figure 3 – Other materials used for knitting needle packets : top, New Link, an early Asian production with cellophane over a cardboard insert; note the use of the word Trademark on the right of the insert. Middle, Abel Morrall used a cellophane sleeve, printed on both sides, for their famous Flora MacDonald brand of needles. Bottom, this Sphinx brand packet for A.G. Baylis & Sons of Redditch is made of oiled paper; the reverse side has Spanish writing, indicating an overseas market – perhaps the oiled paper was to help protect against the effects of salty sea air.



Wooden or cardboard tubes were offered by many well-known manufacturers, but the tubes were also sold without any branding at all. The tubes had the additional advantage of preventing the points from poking out of paper or cellophane and stabbing the knitter or entering another fabric or material. It has also been suggested that these tubes were developed to send knitting needles to the troops in World War I. I have not seen any specific advertising regarding this, but certainly there are general ads for needles in tubes in the wholesalers' catalogues before World War I. They were sold in the US as well as in the UK, and probably other countries as well; but I believe they all originated in the UK. Maddeningly for the collector, most labels on these tubes are wound around the tube, making it very hard to photograph the entire label.



Figure 4 – Wooden or cardboard tubes, from top down : A large cardboard tube from the major London wholesaler, W.H. Head & Son; a large wooden tube with a label for Thomas Perks & Sons; next, two tubes for brands which I think were sold in the US though made in England, Universal and Progress; next, Alfred Shrimpton's well-known Maltese cross logo, and finally a labelled tube for Thomas Harper & Sons.

The paper packet of double-pointed needles continued to be offered by wholesalers into the 1940's as shown in Abel Morrall's 1942 catalogue; but gradually four-colour print and cardboard replaced the solid colour background – generally for more “up-market” brands of needles.

Figure 5 - Early coloured-printed packets of double point needles, from top :

1. Jager's green packet featured its use of Duraloid, a brand name for the aluminium metal developed at the end of World War I.
2. The Black Magic brand differentiated itself by selling black-coated needles and only in pairs, despite the packet being the same width as those holding a set of four.
3. The US Heirloom Needlework Guild's Hiawatha brand was sold in a blue paper packet which noted that the needles were "made expressly for BEADED BAG KNITTING", that the needles were made in England, and that Patent No. 19185 (the same patent number quoted by Abel Morrall) applied to the "Rustproof Envelope". UK Imperial size 18 needles is a very fine brand for the date of this packaging, in the mid-1950's-1970's, I think.
4. Two Canadian Fingertip packets noted use of another aluminium brand name Duraluminum and also gave the manufacturer's name, Aviation Products (this firm was in operation after World War II).
5. Daintree brand's blue paper packet noted that it could be obtained at Coles (discount department) Stores and that the needles were made in Australia.



As with their extensive sewing needle brand range, Henry Milward & Sons kept using the brand names of the knitting needle firms they took over; and they experimented with numerous styles of packaging for knitting needles, including branding labels on the wooden tubes and cardboard backing into which a set of double-points could be inserted (like a much coarser relative of the early paper- or felt-stuck sewing needle packs).



Figure 6 – Examples of Milward's packaging, from the top:

1. A cardboard backing card for five needles, possibly 1920's?
2. and 3. two packets for Milward's Phantom brand of mid-range needles.
4. A much later set of plastic point protectors – note that the firm's name does not appear, just its distinctive device name Disc embossed on the plastic. The name Milward is impressed into the back.
5. A very early manila packet which includes two protective tissue papers, inner black and outer manila.

## Part 2 – Metal cases to protect knitting needles

Flat cases of pressed tin offered protection from rust (the special paper was also used) and also protected the knitter from stabbing herself or her possessions with the sharp points when needles were not in use. Both Crescent and James Smith & Son are early knitting pin manufacturers who sold needles in pressed tin cases, but I am not sure how early the first tin case appeared.

Figure 7 - Pressed tin cases, left, a variety of case sizes and pressings; right, a close-up of the labelling



From top down :

1. James Smith & Son used this expensive packaging in 1898 to advertise their new, premium brand, the Double Century, a celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the firm. The label back notes “patent applied for”.
2. Another Double Century case, now without the name of James Smith & Son but with the epithet “The REGd DOUBLE CENTURY CASE No. 469870”
3. The Crescent Manufacturing Co managed to fit their logo on the label of their case which they called on the back of the label “The DURABLE CASE”
4. The buff label for the “Silver Queen” Steel Knitting Pin Set includes the reference “No. 2126” and is glued onto a unique pattern for the pressed tin. Silver Queen is a very rare brand of knitting needle.
5. The “Neatality” Knitting Pin Case is a brand unknown from any other reference.
6. and 7. These Cross-Fox and “Boye” cases have no label, just the brand name embossed on the tin case.
8. The final labelled case shows the logo of the large US knitting needle supplier Boye, but notes “made in England” and gives the size in UK Imperial 18. The label also says that it contains steel nickel plated knitting pins with gilt tips – this last a sign of very high quality, rarely found outside boxed needlework sets.

In 1898 James Smith & Son used the tin case for their new premium brand, the Double Century, to help celebrate 200 years since the founding of the firm. Notice in Figure 7 that the name of James Smith & Son has disappeared on the second case – after the firm was taken over by Milwards – but the James Smith founding date remains and a patent number has arrived! James Smith was founded about 40 years earlier than Henry Milward & Sons. Although Milwards kept Double Century as a premium brand for at least 40 years, it dropped the James Smith founding date. Going forward, Milwards used its own founding date of 1735.

Another metal case, much heavier and even more luxurious, was the Mitrailleuse tube-type, so named for its resemblance to an early Belgian machine gun, with four compartments for different sized needles. (This type of case was even more common for sewing needles.) Figure 8 shows four of these cases. Although different in appearance and colour, they are all exactly alike in construction, carry the same references to the patent holder Jackne & Co, and presumably were made by the one company which filled orders from all comers.



Figure 8 – The gold lettering and design and the camouflage background make these luxury cases hard to photograph. Here, from top down, are a blue case for Kirby Beard & Co, one for Acorn Stoves (why, why ? !), the Crescent Manufacturing Co, still displaying their logo in the centre of the case, and at the bottom, a case branded for the Sydney department store Farmers – one of this firm’s claims to fame was the first plate-glass windows in Australia, installed in 1854<sup>6</sup> but I think the case is much later than that.

Still another, cheaper metal case was produced in Germany and appeared in the US and UK around, I think, the early twentieth century. With a yellow background, it has been found in three versions, one titled Lady Smith, one titled Martha Washington, and the third titled Eureka. Possibly this Eureka brand name was related to the German knitting needles manufacturer Heureka. The graphic on the right of the tube, a “Gibson Girl” type head, is the same on both tubes; only the printing on the left half of the tube has changed. The Martha Washington tube is the rarer, and the graphic resembles the historic Martha. I have dated these

Figure 9 – Tin tubes with printed lithography

The bottom tubes state made in Germany, while the top, triangular tube is also probably German, although not so marked.



tubes based, firstly, on the 1899 occurrence of the battle of Ladysmith during the Boar War, and, secondly, on the development of tin-lithography about this time. There were obviously many other examples of tin

lithography – see the triangular tube in Figure 9. Again, I think this is German; the back side has metric-American size equivalents.

There is one additional metal holder for knitting needles, the clasp. Numerous unbranded needles were sold clasped together, both double-point and single-point, in a tin or pot-metal clasp, probably up to the 1950-60's – see Figure 10. And, a few firms used this fastening to brand themselves. I think these branded clasps were quite early, as the needles are very fine (size 17 Imperial), and there is extra work and cost to create and affix the clasp.

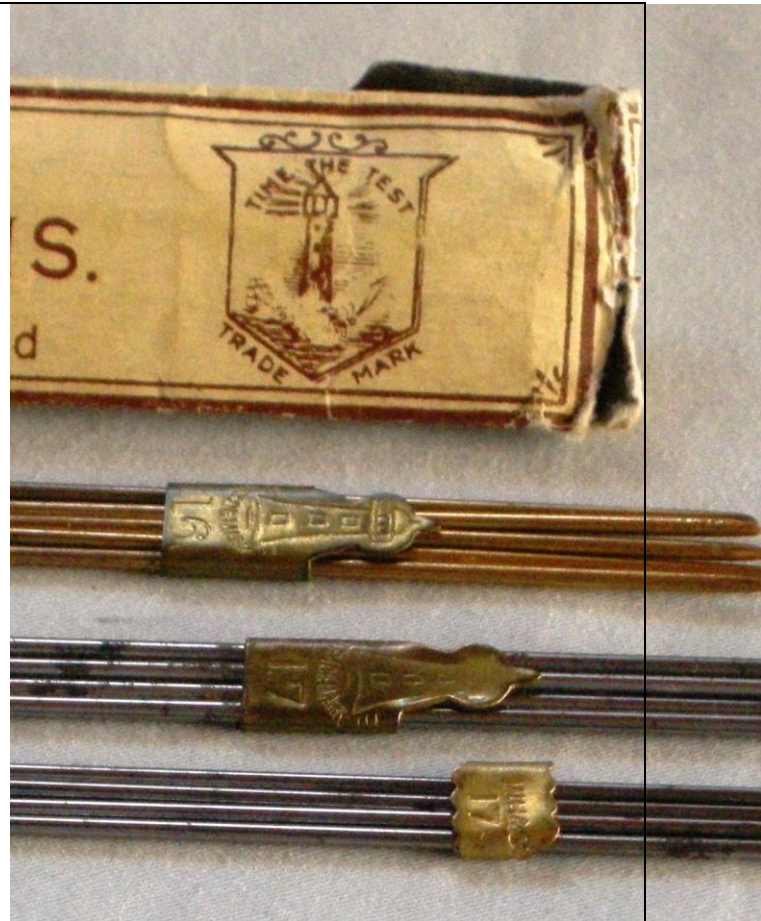


Figure 10 – Metal clasps to hold needles. Above, four clasps, together with a printed paper packet with the same lighthouse trademark as the two clasps below it. The top clasp has no brand name, and held a pair of single-pointed needles. Right, a close-up of the early cream paper packet with brown printing for Morris & Yeoman's Lighthouse brand of knitting needles, showing their trademark lighthouse in an escutcheon on the right, and including their motto, "Time the Test". Below, two sets of M&Y size 17 Imperial double points with the Lighthouse clasp. There is no brand name, and no motto on the clasp, but the needle size and the word "trademark" are stamped into the metal. Note the top set comprises gold- coloured needles (brass?) in

a cellophane packet. At bottom is a set of 4-inch long double-points in a clasp stamped W.H&Co and, on the back of the clasp, the registration symbol. Four-inch needles are quite rare, having been dropped by most manufacturers early in the modern period.

Other areas of interest in early knitting needle branding and packaging include early American packaging and the inclusion of brand names on the needles themselves – but we'll save these for later issues. I am grateful to Molly Pearce, Joyce Poynter, Sheila Williams and others for their help with fact-checking and other suggestions.

## Appendix 1 - Some Dates in Development of Merchandising of Knitting Needles

1840	<i>The Workwoman's Guide</i> gives the earliest reference we have found to single point knitting needles with stoppers or knobs on one end. <sup>7</sup>
1842	Miss Lambert's <i>Handbook of Needlework</i> gives another very early reference to single

	point needles with stopper on one end : P. 92, “some have a very small ivory ball at one end to prevent the work from slipping off.” <sup>8</sup>
1851	W. Carter’s <i>The Royal Victoria Knitting Book</i> recommended Walkers needles, English size 22, and Manlove’s crochet thread for Pattern 80 for a baby’s cap, the first reference to a brand of knitting needle. P. 158.
1883	Olnay Amsden catalogue advertised their Crescent gauge and introduced the black Protector Knitting Pin envelope. The catalogue also noted that single point needles were sold to retailers in boxes colour coded for their quality (firsts, seconds, thirds). Vulcanite needles were also advertised in this catalogue.
1898	James Smith & Son advertised the 200 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of their firm (founded in 1698) on their tin-cased sets of needles – the “Double Century” range
1900, after	John James catalogue illustrates wooden tubes and a unique set of two caps to hold 4xdp needles (haven’t seen this one before)
1911	Newey Brothers and D.F. Taylor’s catalogue advertised 4xdp “clipped in sets of 4” and in “wooden cylinders” and in envelopes of 4
1911	Abel Morrall catalogue shows earliest metal single point knitting needles with a brand name (Clive) impressed on the metal needle – here on the shaft, with a spherical stopper. Also line drawings of Erinoid, celluloid, vulcanite, and wood pairs with a paper wrapper. And, the earliest ad I’ve seen for a circular needle, the Twin-Pin in a paper sleeve.
1932	Newey Brothers & D.F. Taylor catalogue notes it (still) sells needles loose in boxes and in polished steel.

<sup>1</sup> *The Account Book of Richard Latham 1724-1767*, edited by Lorna Weatherill, Oxford University Press, 1900.

<sup>2</sup> In 1840, A Lady (the unnamed authoress), writing in *The Workwoman’s Guide*, gave instructions about knitting pins to the class-conscious public of Britain : “Knitting pins or needles, as they are variously called, are made of iron or brass, for common use, and steel for best. They can be procured of every size and thickness, and are sold in sets, each set containing four pins. These sets cost from ½ d to 2d each, according to the metal and size.

“Ivory, bone, whalebone, steel, rosewood, ebony, and cane pins, of a larger size and thickness, are employed for knitting coverlids, boots, carpets, and other thickly knit articles. These are sometimes twenty inches, or two feel long, and have a knob at one end to prevent the stitches from slipping off. Of these pins two or three form the set. For schools, common pins may be procured from a carpenter or turner, for 2d. a set, whereas the former are charged at from 1s. 6d. to 2s. or 9s. the set. “

Thank you to Tamar Lindsay for bringing this reference (the earliest I have seen) to my attention after Lynn Carpenter posted it on HistoricKnit in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *The Great Recloning of Rural England*, Margaret Spufford, The Hambledon Press, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> See Molly Pearce articles in *Needle Notes*, No. 16, 2002, and No 17, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The reference is from [www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/A\\_Lot\\_In\\_Store\\_ch2.pdf](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/A_Lot_In_Store_ch2.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See endnote 2 above.

<sup>8</sup> The publication is more famous for Miss Lambert’s illustration of her needle size gauge, *The Standard Filiere*. She claimed it as her own invention. Its measurements do not align with other early gauges which claimed independent descent from the British Standard Wire Gauge.