



Bulletin

A Quarterly Newsletter by, for and about Thimble and Needlework Tool Collectors

Twin Pins – A History of Circular Knitting Needles *Twice as Nice OR Double Trouble?*

Part 1

by Susan Webster

Advances in technology are rare for a craft based on such simple components as handknitting—basically “two sticks and a string.”

Although knitting developed in the Middle East around the start of the common era, by the end of the 14th century, existing artwork proves that European knitters used double-pointed needles to knit in the round.

Then, toward the end of the 18th century, European knitters added stoppers to one end of their needles to prevent stitches from sliding off the back end. Knobbed needles could not be used for knitting in the round, but they were great for knitting flat textile pieces that could be made up into garments or edgings. These stoppered needles, so familiar to us today, seem to have moved from Europe to England in the first quarter of the 19th century.

Finally, circular needles were introduced to general usage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some evidence suggests that Scandinavians used baleen or other flexible natural materials before the Industrial Revolution.

This paper examines the development of circular knitting needles up to about 1960, mainly in the United Kingdom and the United States. Part 1 examines the early days in the United Kingdom.

So far, the earliest patents for circular knitting needles have been identified in the United Kingdom, including No. 22,904 in November 1893.

Maria Kehrmann of Coblenzer, Germany, filed a second United Kingdom patent dated December 1906. Existing documentation for this patent includes diagrams very similar to those appearing in knitting booklets of this period, possibly taken from such booklets.

These and other patents did not result in a marketplace flooded with circular needles.

In 1918-1919, the catalogue and price list of the large London haberdasher W.H. Head & Son did not list circular knitting needles at all among its offerings of “knitting pins with knobs, pointed both ends” and “steel knitting pins, vulcanite, bone, and real ivory.”

Nevertheless, by the early 1920s, boxed sets of circular knitting

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Figure 1. The FLEXIKNIT box has a printed colour label pasted onto the box lid. This packaging does not give a manufacturer or seller. Note the implied date of 1921 on the patent application number 24625/21. The message on this box is that the circular knitting needle is a new device.

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Figure 5. A FLEXIKNIT advertisement indicates the product's issuer is the long-established London wholesaler Olney Amsden & Sons. This advertisement was identified by Barbara Smith and published in her blog *Barbara Knits Again* in February 2020.

By the 1920s, many manufacturers of straight knitting needles, both metal and resin-based, had inscribed their brand name and gauge size on either the shaft or the stopper. This was done with a few early circular needles, but the practice was soon abandoned, presumably because it was too fiddly in production. See FLEXIKNIT inscribed on the needle in Figure 6.

So, manufacturers of circular needles primarily relied on the packaging to keep their brand name in the knitter's mind. Advertising for knitting needle brands was already beginning to appear in the general and trade press.

Knitting needle gauges had to be used in the United Kingdom and the United States for sizing.

Double Century was a brand name first used by James Smith & Son, needle makers of Redditch, to celebrate the firm's 200th anniversary in 1898. Double Century's single-point, double-point, and circular knitting needles were very upmarket, with the single points having a plasticised coating over the metal core. They also sold (and may have pioneered) traditional metal double points in pressed metal tins.



Figure 6. Patent numbers 209832 and the name FLEXIKNIT are inscribed on the needle.



Figure 7. Two boxes are holding circulars, with an almost identical printed paper label pasted onto the lid of each box. The seller's printed name on the top box is Wm. Briggs & Co., Ltd, with a street address in Manchester. The firm is described in *British National Archives* materials as a needle manufacturer and elsewhere as wholesale art needlework and hand-knitting wool specialists. In the lower box, the seller's name is James Smith and Son; the firm's address implies that it is the maker of the needles (not just the seller), in the needle making centre of Redditch on the bottom of one of the boxes.

In Figure 7, the Double Century box on top shows the name Wm. Briggs & Co., Ltd, a Manchester yarn spinner. James Smith & Son was still in business for the lower box in the 1920s. The Double Century brand name was eventually acquired by Milwards and used for another twenty or thirty years. Steelnoid was a sub-brand name used on the circulars made of metal cables, and it also appears on the instruction insert.



Figure 8. The early Abel Morrall Ltd. box with the paste-on label. The implied date of the patent application is 1923. This box is the first identified use of the term "Twin-Pin."



Figure 9. A fold-over cardboard packet with slots on the back to thread the needle through — impossible to get it all back inside. This needle was "made in England," and the size, Imperial No. 11, was inscribed on each needle.

Marketing messages now included reassurances about common problems with knitting needles—"will not soil," "no slipped stitches," and "smooth as silk."

It is unclear if unbranded circulars were available through wool shops or other outlets during this time.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, cardboard sleeves replaced boxes, which were much cheaper to produce. The great needle house of

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Abel Morrall started with boxes, then cardboard sleeves, and then cardboard backing sheets (Figs. 8, 9, and 10).

Abel Morrall started business in 1844, was a prominent exhibitor at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition, and was a great innovator. Early 20th-century packaging for straight or double-pointed needles says “made at Clive Works”—in other words, at the firm’s own mill.

Abel Morrall included more marketing messages: “a boon to ladies who travel,” “will not rust,” “no slipped stitches,” and “will not soil the most delicate shades.” Almost all packaging for any maker or seller included messages that reflected another anxiety of post-World War One Britain, “made in England.”

Circular knitting needles were also issued under the “Coronet” brand name (Figs. 11, 12, and 13) by Faudels of London, a depot and haberdashery retailer, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Dimensions of the box differ slightly from those of other boxes used to merchandise circular needles.

It can be assumed that not all sellers of circular needles made their own circulars (Figs. 14, 15, and 16). Where the distributor was a haberdasher or depot using its own brand name, like Vicars, Faudels, or Olney Amsden, they presumably bought these circulars from a manufacturer.

The Alfred Shrimpton’s backing card in Figure 17, like the Easyknit card in Figure 10, illustrates one of the problems with displaying and handling the circulars with metal



Figure 10. Another Abel Morrall marketing venture for circulars was named “Easyknit.” Note the torn cardboard where the needles had been removed and later re-inserted.



Figure 12. The guidelines for the use of the Coronet circular needle.



Figure 13. The Coronet circular needle inside its oiled paper packet to prevent rust.

cable connectors. The flexible metal cable component was quite resistant to bending. Using cardboard backing allowed the needle to be threaded through the holes to



Figure 11. The box for the Faudel’s Coronet circular needle. The drawing of the needle shows its construction with the metal cable welded onto the pins.



Figure 14. The “Rounda” knitting pin maker or retailer is unknown. The paper label is still pasted onto the fold-over cardboard packaging and says “made in England.”



Figure 15. The heavy cardboard packet for the Vicars “Caliban” pin with its guidelines pasted onto the oiled paper packet to prevent rust. The name is different, but the guidelines are exactly the same as those on the Coronet box in Figure 12. Note the pin peeking out of the paper packet and the general scruffiness of the folds in the cardboard — more struggles to contain the metal cables.

A Thimble Donation

TCI has accepted another donation of thimbles. These came to us from Rebekah Kempske on behalf of her late grandmother, Marie Owens Kempske of Baltimore, Maryland. We are most grateful for the donation.

Marie Owings Kempske was a woman of many talents and passions. In addition to her beautiful embroidery projects and love of collectible dolls, she also cultivated an amazing thimble collection. These awesome artifacts reflected her love of travel, as she often picked them out as a perfect souvenir.

She also enjoyed receiving them as gifts from family and friends. Many of the items in her collection also reflected her love of animals, with designs appreciating creatures great and small. Her thimble collection is a testament to a wonderful, long life of love and adventure.

All donations of thimbles and needlework tools are most welcome. TCI uses the items for MOP at conventions, auction items, and to fill goodie bags for first-time convention attendees. All proceeds benefit TCI by helping offset our operating costs. ■



Marie Owings Kempske

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hold it firm. But even tough cardboard was not strong enough to resist the force of the cable. Getting the circular needle out of the card and back in again for storage often resulted in a torn backing card.

During the 1930s, packaging became cheaper (Figs. 10 and 17), presumably due to the Depression's financial pressure and as circulars moved into the mass market.

Circulars were also widely marketed in the United States during the 1930s. Part 2 will examine this phenomenon.

I thank Jo-ann Gloger, Keeper of Collections at Forge Needle Museum in Redditch, England, and Molly Pearce of Redditch for their help with United Kingdom patents. Thank you also to many others who have provided information for this research.

Information provided by Dr. Cary Karp, a researcher on looped



Figure 16. Cardboard packet for the "Cable." with the name of the needle manufacturer, Alfred Shrimpton & Sons.

fabric and previously a professor and curator of musicology in Sweden, has identified references to the pre-industrial revolution's use of circular knitting needles made of materials like balcen. Karp studies trace references in German and Scandinavian publications, which note that the use of such circulars was dying out by the middle of the



Figure 17. Another offering from the big needle-making firm of Alfred Shrimpton & Sons. The firm was also well known in the United States due to its export partnerships. Note that a string is fastened to the top of the card, which is an early device for hanging the card on a display hook or board.

19th century.

Sources

"Jaeger Hand-Knit No. 7." *Leach's Sixpenny Knitting Series*. 1931. ■