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An Unusual Inkstand

by Peter Hayward

Pewter inkstands come in a wide variety of forms, as a glance at any book on pewter will confirm. However one recently acquired is quite different from anything I have seen recorded before. It is a portable inkstand which folds away into a convenient flat package that can easily be slipped in the pocket.

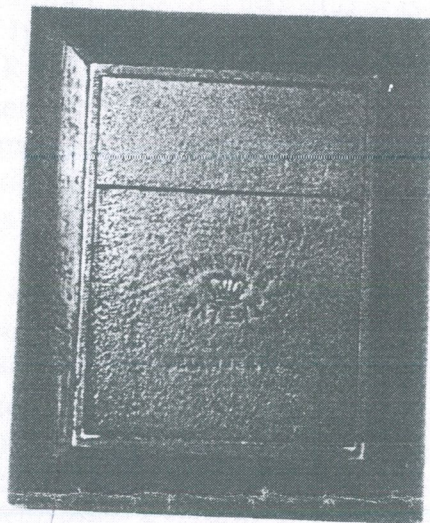
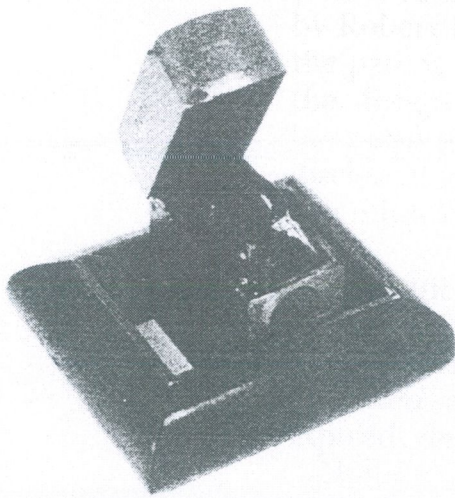


Figure 18 and Figure 19. Ranome's Patent inkwell.

Portable inkstands were popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the days before fountain pens (let alone ball points or felt tips), if you wanted to write a letter or complete your diary while you were travelling you had to take your ink with you. The difficulty was that inkstands needed to stand very stably on the table when in use so that you could dip your pen in without risk of upsetting the ink container. Thus even portable inkstands tended to be relatively bulky. The one acquired overcomes this problem with a very neat, patented design.

It comprises a rectangular box containing the ink bottle, which pivots and slides in a rectangular frame between 1). a closed position in which the box lies wholly within the frame and 2). an open position in which the box stands upright centrally in the frame. In the closed position, the whole thing forms a compact, flat pack $3\frac{7}{8}$ " x $2\frac{3}{8}$ " x $\frac{7}{8}$ ". In the open position, the frame forms a stable base to steady the upright ink pot.

The whole construction is of high quality. The box itself is 2 " x $1\frac{1}{2}$ " x $\frac{7}{8}$ " and is made of cast pewter. The upper third of the box is cast separately to form a hinged lid with sarcophagus-style top. The lower part contains

a glass ink bottle, held steady by a flat spring. The bottle itself has no cap. Instead, as in most portable inkstands, the lid contains a spring-loaded seal which presses on the top of the bottle when the lid is shut. The lid is held shut by a spring catch operated by an externally-flush circular button, and a brass ball catch projects from top of the lid to hold the box itself in position when folded away in the frame. The frame is of two parts - a pewter inner frame surrounded by an outer frame of polished wood.

The box is marked 'RANSOME'S PATENT' and 'DE LA RUE & CO.' The patent in question is number 933 of 1861 and was filed on 16 April 1861 by Robert Ransome of Ipswich. Presumably the patentee sold or licensed the patent to the de la Rue Company, who modified some of the details of the design because there are slight differences between the inkstand I have and the illustrations in the patent. For example, the patent does not disclose a frame made of both wood and metal. The patent also describes two other embodiments of fold-away boxes for ink bottles.

The patent would have expired in 1875, and it is possible that the inkstand was made between about 1862 and 1875. It *could* have been made even later because at that time it was not illegal to continue marking your goods '*patented*' after the patent had expired. However, once the patent had expired, de la Rue would not have needed permission from Ransome to exploit the invention, and it seems unlikely that they would have bothered to mark the inkstand '*Ransome's patent*' if they were not making it with Ransome's permission.



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