

Agenoria - a Roman Odyssey

The Victorians had a love of the ancient world; its myths and legends so no wonder some sewing machine manufacturers were tempted to name their machines after the ancient gods.

None though are more mysterious than Agenoria, - not the Roman goddess for we know she was the goddess of industry and silence, rather the Agenoria sewing machine which was produced in Birmingham by several different firms. All the machines bear that mystical name and all have almost identical face plates depicting the Goddess Agenoria with a prone lion.



So what was going on? Perhaps we should start at the beginning but where or who was that - Maxfield, Franklin, Harris, Imperial or Royal?

This is a question I thought I had found the answer to several years ago but further recent research has made me revise some of my original thoughts.

In fact we need to start with a company I have been able to find little about but which none the sets us on the road to solving the puzzle.

The firm was a partnership between Richard Wood, Isaac Cole and Arthur Maxfield, when the company was founded I haven't been able to determine, but on 30th December 1867 this partnership which had been manufacturing sewing machines under the name Cole, Maxfield & Co., at the Franklin Works, Park Road, Birmingham was dissolved.

The firm's debts were paid off by Isaac Cole and Arthur Maxfield who had agreed to continue to manufacture sewing machines under the name the Franklin Company at the Franklin Works in this new venture they were joined by one Charles Fowke.

Very early Franklin machines appear to have had a fast & loose balance wheel (fast meaning fixed) this meant that the balance wheel could be disengaged for bobbin winding.

This feature was discontinued on later machines however the undrilled casting is left on one of the spokes of the balance wheel.

The Franklin Company partnership was time limited and was dissolved on 23rd November 1872 through effluxion of time. It would seem likely however that the partners would have started preparations for their futures well in advance of that date.

Arthur Maxfield had by 1873 moved to new premises - The New Street Works, 71 & 72 Spencer St, Birmingham, which were also referred to as the Agenoria Sewing Machine Works. There trading

as A. Maxfield & Co., he set about producing his loose wheel Agenoria which also used a different shuttle mechanism to earlier Agenoria machines.

Early Maxfield machines have Agenoria on the arm however this was soon changed to Maxfield.

The company's Trade Mark of St. George slaying a dragon is stamped on the stitch plate along with the patent date 20th August 1870. A. Maxfield & Co. went out of business in November 1877.



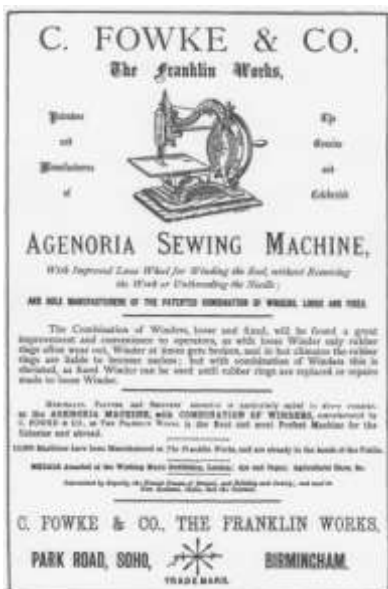
Isaac Cole on the other hand gave up making sewing machines and started retailing them. He established a business in Edinburgh trading in sewing machines as Cole & Co. from premises at South Charlotte Street. Some late Franklin Company machines bear the stamp Cole & Co. so presumably Isaac Cole had purchased a stock of machines before the partnership was dissolved.

In 1873 Maxfield entered into an agreement with Cole to supply him with Agenoria sewing machines. In some of his advertisements Cole actually claimed to manufacture the machine at a factory in Birmingham. In 1874 he was advertising the Agenoria as “the oldest hand shuttle machine, none genuine unless stamped Cole & Co. Edinburgh”.

Isaac Coles’ assets both personal and business were sequestrated in December 1876 at which time his business address was given as 104 Princess Street, Edinburgh.

Charles Fowke remained at the Franklin Works and in 1873 he was producing Agenoria sewing machines using the Franklin Trade Mark but under the name Charles Fowke & Co.

The machines Fowke produced had a loose wheel and what was referred to as the “Patent Combination of Winders”. One bobbin winder was as found on the original Agenoria machine but there was a second bobbin winder driven using the loose wheel.



In his advertisement Fowke claimed that 10,000 machines had been made at the Franklin Works however I suspect this figure includes those made by the earlier companies.

The firm of C. Fowke & Co. was short lived. It would seem that Fowke sold out to Joseph Harris and John Judson who in 1873 had formed a partnership to manufacture sewing machines trading as the Imperial Sewing Machine Co.

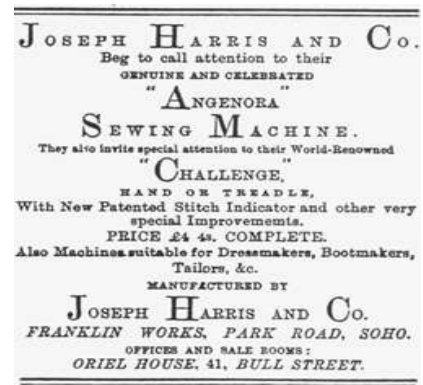
In March 1874 Harris & Judson had patented an improved shuttle mechanism and by May 1874 Harris & Judson were advertising as the Imperial Sewing Machine Co. Park Road, this was the same factory previously occupied by both the Franklin and Fowke companies

From what I can gather the Imperial Sewing Machine Co. only undertook the manufacturing of the sewing machines with the sale and distribution apparently being undertaken by Joseph Harris & Co.

The partnership between Harris & Judson was dissolved on 31st December 1877.

The Agenoria machines produced by the Imperial Sewing Machine Co have "The Original Franklin Sewing Machine Co." embossed on the faceplate.

As for Fowke's "Patent Combination of Winders" the feature must have had some merit as it was used on some Agenoria machines produced by both the Imperial Sewing Machine Co. and later the Royal Sewing Machine Co. It also features on some Challenge machines.



How many machines were produced by the Imperial Sewing Machine Co. is not known but an instruction book refers to 17,000 machines being produced at the Franklin works again I suspect this would included the 10,000 machines referred to in Fowkes' advertisement.

By April 1878 The Royal Sewing Machine Company Ltd was advertising that it had purchased the sewing machine business of J. Harris & Co. and that it would continue to make and take orders for the Agenoria and Challenge machines. The company ran the same advertisement until at least January 1880.

In its price lists the company states that "Every (Agenoria) Machine bears the Imperial Coat of Arms, as a Trade Mark, without which none are genuine".

In 1882 the Royal Sewing Machine Co. Ltd changed its name to the Royal Machine Manufacturing Co. Ltd and the last reference I have come across to the Agenoria sewing machine being produced by the company is 1883. The Royal Machine Manufacturing Co. Ltd was in liquidation by 1888.

There are still some loose ends to tie up but I think that explains the links between the companies and gives an approximate time frame in which to place the various different Agenoria machines and their makers.

I have been collating serial number data from Agenoria machines but so far I have too little information to draw any detailed conclusions (not ones I'd want to publish anyway!).

I'd be interested to receive details from anyone who has an Agenoria machine. I need to know the serial number, manufacturer and details of any retailers stamps, trademarks, patentee names or the like stamped on the cloth plate.

My email is: bradbury1852@lineone.net

DID YOU KNOW?

That Arthur Maxfield applied for a patent for improvements to sewing machines in June 1867 along with Henry Willis and George Rice?

Willis & Rice having earlier patented the bobbin winder which is found on Busy Bee machines.

Or

That Arthur Maxfield once worked for Newton Wilson?

This came to light during a court case in 1875 Arthur Maxfield was using St. George slaying a Dragon as his trade mark and Newton Wilson wanted to stop him as he was using a similar image on his England's Queen machine - Wilson lost.

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