

## IF YOU'VE GOT A SINGER THEN WE'VE GOT THE CHOIR!

Most people have one sewing machine or possibly even two lying about the house. But then we're not most people, to-date we have well over one hundred sewing machines and no, they're not toy ones, we collect pre-war Domestic machines both foot operated treadles and hand cranks.

To the casual observer a sewing machine is just well a... sewing machine, but look closely and you will find there is a vast array of designs from the Singer machine everyone's Granny had with its plain gold decals to beautiful machines artistically decorated with brightly coloured decals or inlaid with Mother of Pearl—the variety is astounding.



*PHOTO 1 Not all Singers had plain Gold decals. This Singer 12 dating from 1890 has beautiful coloured Decals. This model introduced in 1865 launched Singer on the road to success and was copied by almost every other manufacturer*

The names of most manufacturers along with the history of the Companies have long been forgotten, except for Singer. But it *wasn't* Singer that invented the sewing machine. Isaac Singer & his partner Edward Clark simply did for the sewing machine what Henry Ford did for the motor car or Bill Gates did for the computer.

Like a lot of inventions, one cannot specify a particular date when the sewing machine was invented. As far back as 1790 Englishman Thomas Saint patented what could be considered to be a sewing machine, but whether it was practical is another matter. In 1830 Frenchman, Barthemy Thimonnier designed and built not just one, but eighty simple Chain Stitch machines. Had it not been for a violent protest by a mob of Tailors who destroyed these machines, the history of the sewing machine might have taken a different direction. Instead, in America, it was Elias Howe's patent of 10th September 1846 that was to prove crucial. It heralded seven years of litigation as although other inventors had patented various mechanisms that made the sewing machine practical

Howe's patent covered the most important facets. The culmination was the formation of a 'Patent Combination' in 1856; this recognised that to be practical a machine needed to use several different patents. The Patent owners therefore pooled their patents and charged a Royalty to any Company which used them.

So the honours for the invention of a practical sewing machine go not to one single person but to many whose genius led to one of the most important yet underrated inventions of all time.



*PHOTO 2 Howe Machine dating to about 1882 by which time it was totally out of date.*

The sewing machine was seen as the emancipator of women and without it modern day life would have been very different. You don't believe us? Look at your clothes, then imagine each item being laboriously hand stitched. In 1863 it took an average of 14 hours 26 minutes to stitch just *one* Gentlemen's shirt. The use of a sewing machine reduced this to 1 hour 16 minutes, still not convinced? Where power was used an average 2000 stitches per minute could be produced by A sewing machine yet only 38 stitches could be produced by hand in the same time.

The first true sewing machines began to appear in America in the late 1840's and it was the Wheeler & Wilson Sewing Company that went on to initially dominated the market, in 1861 making almost 50 percent of the 40,000 machines sold. Other famous American manufacturers included Grover & Baker, Howe, Willcox & Gibbs, White and of course Singer. All opened showrooms and had agencies throughout Britain. But the Singer Manufacturing Company and the Howe Machine Company went one step further establishing factories in Glasgow in 1867 and 1872 respectively. In fact Singer sales increased so dramatically that the factory had to be moved twice, first to Bridgeton and then to Kilbowie. The latter had a floor area of nearly one million square feet

and was capable of producing an average of 13,000 machines a week. It was the largest sewing machine factory in the World.

In Oldham in 1852 Thomas & Frederick Sugden along with George Bradbury made history and became Britain and Europe's first sewing machine manufacturers with the introduction of the 'Lancashire' machine, first made exactly one hundred and sixty years ago this year. The firm later became Bradbury & Co and for over 70 years would produce a variety of industrial and domestic sewing machines, as well as bicycles, bassinettes (prams), machine tools, lathes and motor cycles.



*PHOTO 3 Bradbury Medium V.S. in stunning condition & dating to 1908. This machine was donated to our collection and came from the Isle of Wight.*

By 1908 Bradbury & Company had produced 45 different designs of sewing machine including the Belgravia, introduced in 1868 which was a superb adaptation of a Wheeler & Wilson machine but which could produce six different stitches, including embroidery. The Rotary Shuttle was introduced in 1879, it was produced as various models and was extremely successful, the Wellington a pretty cast based lock stitch machine, the Magic chain stitch machine as well as other machines which were based on Singer and Howe type machines.

Industrial machines in Bradbury's range included the Practical Tailor and most importantly the A1 Repairer specifically designed for cobblers it was so successful it was in production for over 50 years. Sadly this world leading Company was itself a casualty of the First World War, never able to regain its markets.

Other long forgotten British manufacturers abound such as W.F. Thomas, Newton Wilson & Co, Chadwick & Jones (the latter went on to form Jones & Company which survives today as Brother (UK) Ltd), Gresham & Craven, Britannia Manufacturing Co, to name but a few.

Yorkshire too had its own sewing machine manufacturers such as Hopkinson in Doncaster, Taylor in Driffield and Nussy & Pilling in Leeds but these sadly fell by the wayside. However William Sellers & Co established in 1852 had a factory was at Airedale. The firm made both domestic and industrial sewing machines as well as knitting machines. Production continued until 1920 and we were once told there was a motor museum in part of the old factory.



*PHOTO 4 Stitchwell Family machine made by W. Sellers - date unknown*

Varley and Wolfenden of Keighley, which in the mid 1890's became Varley & Co closed in 1918. The Company produced a range of Domestic machines including a Medium machine which was marketed through the Jewellers Fattorini & Sons of Bradford, quite why a Jeweller was selling sewing machines we don't know but we understand the Company also operated a mail order business.

In Scotland Kimball & Morton produced Industrial and Domestic sewing machines including an amazing one which was cast in the form of a Lion. Before becoming an MP for Ross & Cromarty, James Galloway Weir made a fortune selling an imported chain stitch machine made in Canada by Charles Raymond. The machine was marketed initially as "The American" then as "Weir's 55/-" and later as "The Globe".



*PHOTO 5 The American made c1869 by Charles Raymond*

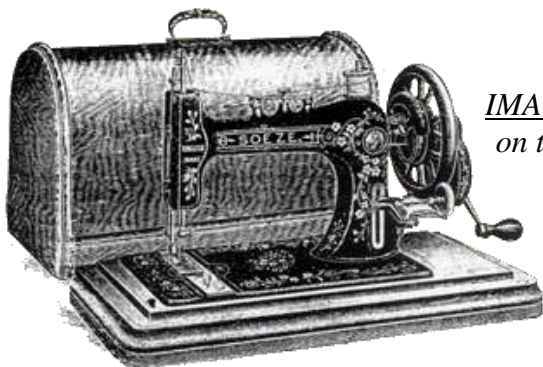
*This diminutive chain stitch machine sold in its thousands*

R.M. Wanzer was another Canadian manufacture who exported machines to Britain the best known of which was the Little Wanzer with its marble base - over 500,000 were produced.

In the 1890's and early 1900's Britains sewing machine industry came under threat not from the huge North American manufacturers but from Germany. Clemens Muller had founded the first German sewing machine company in 1855, and there followed a multitude of other Companies, Frister & Rossmann, Gritzner, Junker & Ruh, Opel, Mundlos and a host of lesser know firms all producing sewing machines often at lower prices and more highly decorated than British machines.

British Companies reacted with typical Bulldog spirit and denigrated these 'Jerry' built machines as being badly designed and crudely made. Throwing mud seems to have worked - leastwise for a while. Imported German machines started appearing with British sounding names such as Nelson, Britannia, The Champion of England or even more bizarrely 'Captain Cook'. Often though these German machines only had Retailers names or no names at all, this, as it was designed to do, makes identifying the manufacturers of these machines very difficult.

Bradbury introduced the Soeze (sew easy) in 1898 specifically to compete directly with the German threat, imploring the British public to support 'Home Industries'. The machine with its up to date vibrating shuttle system should have been an outstanding success priced at £5 17s 6d. But it did not prove popular and went through many modifications during its 7 year production run.



*IMAGE 6 Bradbury Soeze illustration from 1898. The detail on these woodcuts is amazingly accurate.*

Various British sewing machine companies diversified first into bicycle and then into motor bike production and some even went on to manufacturer cars. Yet despite its impact very little has been written about the British sewing machine industry.

We try to research the history of our machines and the companies that made them and are constantly seeking information as well as machines to preserve and display on our web site

[www.sewmuse.co.uk](http://www.sewmuse.co.uk)

Over the past years we have spent much of our limited free time researching Bradbury & Co, gathering documents, advertisements, price lists, manuals and sewing machines. We have a dedicated web site [www.bradbury1852](http://www.bradbury1852) to celebrate the history of this great British Company and would be interested to hear from anyone who has ANY information on the Bradbury Company or who owns a Bradbury Sewing machine.

Most people are astonished at our collection (or is that total disbelief?). Often struggling for words the first coherent question uttered is usually “*Where* do you keep them all ?” Well like many collectors our dream is to be able to afford to open a museum where we can properly display the machines and research material. In the meantime we do that through our web sites - whilst the machines are carefully packed, racked & stacked..... oh we have the odd 1 or 2 (it’s actually about 25) displayed around the house.

The second (slightly more thoughtful) question is, “I have my Grannies Singer... What’s it worth?” The sad truth is not a lot unless it’s a particularly rare example. Most Singer models were literally made in millions, so millions survive. People also tend to confuse collectable with valuable - our most expensive machine was £250 and aside from those kindly donated, the cheapest just £2 - we tossed a coin with an antique dealer for that one... we lost!

David Best can be contacted by email [bradbury1852@lineone.net](mailto:bradbury1852@lineone.net)