

Mauchline Ware Stamp Boxes and Cases Part 1 – Tartan Ware

Tartan is one of the decorative finishes applied to Mauchline Ware items. And Mauchline Ware is so named because it was manufactured in and around the village of Mauchline in Ayrshire. This is of course “Burns’ Country” and many Mauchline Transfer Ware items were made as souvenirs but the items decorated with tartan also became extremely popular. But the Mauchline area itself was not the only place in Scotland that was involved in the manufacture of Mauchline Ware items, and, in whichever area the items were made, the workmanship was of the very highest quality. Collectors of all kinds of writing equipment will be familiar with the great variety of items of Mauchline Ware writing equipment, and collectors of needlework accessories will also know the many and varied items made in their field – all these items were produced in both the Transfer Ware and Tartan Ware finishes.

The wood used in the manufacture is usually sycamore, and the lids of the earlier style of rectangular boxes are hinged to the base by means of what is called a “hidden hinge” – a knuckle joint which was air-tight and provided a tight sealing for such things as snuff boxes and tea caddies. The hinge was invented by James Sandy, who lived in Alyth in Perth & Kinross. He was bedridden for much of his life, and worked at home. After his death in 1819, the secret of the hidden hinge may have been revealed when a broken one was taken to be repaired. The knuckles of the integral hinge are formed alternately from the back and lid of the box, with a metal rod (just slightly shorter than width of the box) passing through and sealed afterwards at the ends. The use of this type of hinge was taken up by Charles Stiven from Laurencekirk in Aberdeenshire, in the manufacture of their range of snuff boxes and tea caddies.

In the early nineteenth century, there were more than 50 individual makers of Mauchline Ware in the area. While many would have been just one person, one of the most important and largest firms was that of William and Andrew Smith, which was started in 1821. Their first product had been a razor strop, but during the 1840s they had greatly expanded their range.

W & A Smith is described in an account of the economy of Mauchline published in 1845 as “a very extensive manufactory of wooden snuff boxes. In this work about 60 people are employed, who work 10 hours a day, 6 days a week.” Andrew Smith is quoted, five years later, in an interview in the *Art Journal* in 1850 as saying that “as the snuff business continued to fall off we sought other articles of woodware to which we could apply our ornaments; these now consist of every article which you can conceive it possible to make, from postage-stamp boxes, up to tea trays”.

Smiths had received a Royal Warrant, from King William IV, in 1832. This Royal Warrant was still in use on goods in the 1840s, including stamp boxes whose foil lining, in which the Warrant was impressed (*photo right*), shows that stamp boxes had developed from their range of snuff boxes. The company was still going strong in 1900, when it was reported to be a multi-storey factory, but the premises burnt down in 1933; ironically, the site is now the local fire brigade.

Tartan grew in popularity from the 1820s and Mauchline Ware makers decorated their goods with tartans, with the tartan lines initially being ruled direct onto the goods which were subsequently painted. Smiths are known to have been using Tartan Ware paper by the 1840s, and subsequently, in 1853, by which time patents had become more affordable, William Smith



patented their machine for drawing the tartans onto paper, a process referred to as “weaving” or jacquard. Smiths were very serious about the accuracy of their tartans, and in 1850 published a book describing and illustrating their 69 “authentic” tartans. A patent for ruling ornamental patterns was also taken out in 1867 by another firm in Mauchline, Samuel Amphlet and J B Fenby, the firm subsequently traded as Davidson, Wilson & Amphlet, and later as Wilson & Amphlet.

W & A Smith took most particular care over how the jacquard paper was glued to the items, especially the joins. Great care was taken over the matching, and where joins were likely to be difficult, black paint was first applied to the area concerned, and wavy gold lines were applied afterwards – this care is evident on items with curved surfaces, such as an egg-shaped etui (sewing companion), but can also be seen to great effect in a different way on the sides of circular stamp boxes, whose lids and bases match in only one position and where the join is almost invisible.

In 1848 Queen Victoria and Prince Albert leased Balmoral, and by 1856 had rebuilt it. They were of course very keen on all things Scottish and it is known that Charles Stiven & Son (Laurencekirk is not far from Balmoral) were awarded a Royal Warrant for supplying Tartan Ware items to Balmoral, and very proudly proclaimed themselves “Boxmakers to the Queen”. It is tantalising to think that perhaps somewhere in the Castle, there just may be one or more Stiven stamp boxes among the items that this company supplied!

It has been reported that some of Stiven’s stamp boxes carry a foil lining identifying the company with an impression of the Royal Warrant awarded to them by Queen Victoria, as do some from Smiths (referred to above). Some boxes identify the tartan in which they are decorated – Smiths are known to show the tartan’s name in discreet gold lettering on a black background, quite small, and neat – but many boxes carry no information as to the maker or the tartan.

Andrew Smith, as mentioned previously, had said in 1850 that his company was producing stamp boxes, but it is unclear when in the 1840s this had started, although a box with a manuscript inscription of the date 9th May 1843 is known to exist, in what would appear to be a contemporary hand. The catalogue for the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 mentions a stamp box being exhibited by Charles Stiven & Son of Laurencekirk – Smiths also exhibited there, as did two of the Tunbridge Ware makers, but there is no other mention of stamp boxes.

It is thought that circular boxes (in a variety of sizes) with lift-off lids are from the 1840s onwards, until the late 1870s – most are decorated with a stamp – this can be a real postage



stamp (often a Penny Red), a real receipt stamp (from the end of 1853), a facsimile of either a postage or receipt stamp, or a stamp-sized portrait, often in a frame of gold dots to simulate perforations, of Queen Victoria on a black background (*photo left*), Prince Albert or Rowland Hill. It is likely that the latter would have been made in either 1860, which celebrated the first twenty years of the Penny Post and was when Rowland Hill was knighted, or in 1879 when he died. It is known that Smiths had an Apograph machine which could copy drawings (larger, original scale or reduced) onto paper or copper and could well have used this to produce the three different sizes (life-size, half-size or miniature) of facsimile stamps for their boxes.

Rectangular stamp boxes with the hidden hinge could well have been made from the 1840s onwards. Of slightly later manufacture, probably from the 1850s, are rectangular boxes with a pin hinge – a metal rod at the rear of the lid – with from two to five internal compartments (*photo right*). A variant of this type of box has a bone lifting knob on the lid for ease of opening, and there is possibly a French connection with this style of box. Mauchline Ware enjoyed an important and thriving export market. Smiths opened a showroom and office in Birmingham in 1829 which was active until the end of the century, and handled their export operations – both for Tartan and Transfer Ware. During this period Birmingham was a centre for world trade in the smaller decorative items which the Victorians called “toys”.



A distinctive type of small box has a snugly-fitting pull-off lid section and is probably contemporaneous with the pin-hinged boxes. One of these exists in the Lorne tartan (*photo left*) and bears a registration mark for 10th December 1870 – four registrations were taken out at this time, two by Smiths and two by Wilson & Amphlet, with each firm



registering a Louise tartan (*photo above right*) and a Lorne tartan. These tartans were created for the marriage of Princess Louise (the fourth daughter of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert) in 1871 to the Marquis of Lorne.



Another distinctive style, but very difficult to offer a date range for, is the rectangular box with a pull-out drawer, (*photos left*) most likely decorated with a stamp. A style easier to date is the fold-over case with a silk lining and slip-in pockets, (*photos right*) likely to have been made from the late nineteenth century onwards. Some still have a black silk (originally elasticised) loop which kept the case closed – none has a stamp on the outside cover.



Among the many tartans decorating stamp boxes, by far the most popular are those in the Stewart / Stuart / Royal Stuart group. M'Beth / McBeth is also popular, as is Caledonia / Caledonian, an invention of Smiths. Also represented are M'Donald / McDonald, M'Lean / McLean, Rob Roy, Buchanan, Prince Charles / Prince Charlie, M'Duff / McDuff, M'Pherson / McPherson and several more. (The inverted comma / apostrophe was used at the time in place of our more usual lower case or superscript "c" although both forms can be found.)

There is an accessible database of Scottish tartans – over 9,000 of them. It is still possible to register new tartans today – there are several categories, including "fashion", "corporate" etc. Taking these modern categories out of the database material, as they could not possibly appear on stamp boxes, still leaves about 3,500 tartans. The names of the tartans are arranged alphabetically but if you just have an unidentified tartan in front of you, it would mean a trawl through all the pictures on the website to seek a likely match!

To sum up, there would appear to be five main types of stamp boxes and cases with a Tartan Ware finish: circular boxes, rectangular boxes, drawer-type boxes, small boxes with a pull-off section, folding wallet-type silk-lined cases – their sizes ranging from one to five compartments. And it is known that 50 or so different tartans have been used on stamp boxes and cases.

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