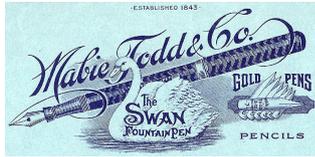


Mabie Todd

Antique fountain pens.
Period 1920 – 1952



An interesting aside: in French the bird, 'swan', is 'signe'. 'Signe' in French has two meanings: the bird, swan, but also the verb to sign. Was this an unintentional play on words? It hardly seems likely, given the purpose of a fountain pen, and yet even in Mabie Todd's 1927 advertising slogan: 'Sign it with a Swan' there is no allusion to this French double meaning – this despite the pens being sold in France at the time. Strange.

Mabie Todd & Co Ltd. The origins of Mabie Todd & Co go back as far as the earliest of fountain pen companies. Like Pelikan (and around the same time as that German company started business) John Mabie and Henry Todd founded a company to make pencils and dip-pen holders, in 1843. Four years later they joined with Bard Brothers who made gold nibs. But it wasn't until 1873, a decade before L. E. Waterman and George Parker founded their companies, that Mabie, Todd & Bard Co was formed under the direction of the immensely capable and versatile William Washington Stewart.

With an eye on the European market, in 1884 an English branch was established, together with the 'Swan' name – making it one of the oldest of all pen model names that would dominate the Twentieth Century. In 1907, both Jonathan Bard, and the comma after 'Mabie', departed. Thus Mabie Todd & Co was born, tripping much more easily off the tongue, with production continuing on both sides of the Atlantic. During the First World War, Mabie Todd & Co developed a 'Trench Pen' that offered soldiers the advantage of dry ink capsules to avoid the problem of transporting bottles of liquid ink.

The 'Swan' brand of fountain pen became known as the pen of the British Empire while a lower-grade fountain pen was named the Blackbird. Indeed a bird/insect/fish theme permeated Mabie Todd's range of stylographic

pens and pencils (cygnet, Katydid, Dace etc). The American company failed to match the innovative zeal of its domestic competitors around this time and the New York Mabie Todd company agreed to sell its interest in the English operation to Mabie Todd & Co Ltd of London in 1915.

In the 1920s a wide range of colours was introduced by the English company for their fine quality pens, exploiting new plastics from America, in lapis lazuli, jade green, Nile green, lavender, tangerine, fuschia and scarlet. This led to even greater success.

In 1932 a leverless pen was introduced, further invigorating the commercial success of the company with a quality, particularly their lizard and marble designs that are among the most exquisite pens ever made in plastic.

In 1936 the Visofil enabled ink-level monitoring, following the trend of companies like Pelikan and Montblanc. Pens were produced in London while their gold nibs were made in Birmingham and ink in Liverpool. The fortunes of the company were not shared on the USA side, however, and the American company closed down in 1938.

So all through this first third of the Twentieth Century there are Mabie Todds made both England and USA, the English pens often being equipped with the American nibs, marked 'N. Y.' for New York. With all manufacture now in England, the London office (Sunderland House)

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was completely destroyed during the Second World War by German aerial bombardment, followed by the factory in North London (Harlesden). In common with a number of other pen companies on both sides of the conflict, production was switched mainly to armaments – now in Mabie Todd's City of London premises.

At the end of the War, and as an interesting historical footnote to pen-filling methods, a lack of rubber prompted the company to return to eyedropper pen manufacture for the first time since the much-welcomed demise of this rather cumbersome system in the 1920s.

In 1948 the company decided to go public but this was not successful, the 1950s seeing a decline in quality, till a large block of shares were bought by Biro Pens.

The 'Swan' name, no doubt being seen as the better part of the company whose shares they had secured, merged with 'Biro' to make 'Biro Swan'.

This company in turn was bought by BIC in 1957, bringing to an end the history of one of the greatest names in fountain pen manufacturing history.

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