



DeLaRue

De La Rue Living Timeline

6. The Onoto, The Pen (1881-1958)

Playing cards, diaries, banknotes, stamps, and writing paper all have something in common - they are all printed! But one of De La Rue's most famous stationery products was not paper-based at all: the fountain pen!

The First Fountain Pens

The fountain pen is a reasonably modern invention. Previously, people used 'dip pens', such as the quill, as opposed the fountain or reservoir pen, which can hold ink in a chamber. There are some early examples reservoir pens, such as one referenced in a tenth-century Islamic text, or those drawn by Leonardo da Vinci. However, they really began to expand in the nineteenth century, which saw a growing number of innovative patents and developments starting with the first proper fountain pen patent in 1827. But it wasn't until the 1880s that the market began to catch up with the developments and the fountain pen became ubiquitous!

This is where De La Rue came in: we launched our first pen, the 'Anti-stylograph', in 1881. It was popular, as were the pens that followed it, such as the 'Swift' in 1884 (which featured a shut-off valve to prevent leakage), and the 'Pelican' (which featured a gold nib and a larger ink capacity).

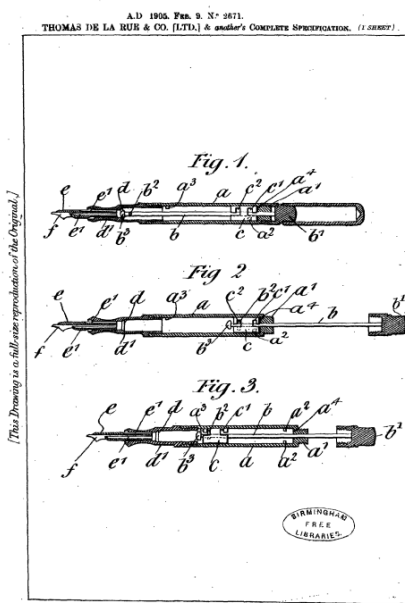


These early De La Rue pens, as well as pens made by other companies, were filled using the 'eye dropper method'. This involved unscrewing the reservoir from the pen, and simply dropping ink in with a small pipette, or eye dropper. This was effective, but could lead to leaks if poorly maintained, and was a cumbersome process. The key challenges of the era therefore were reducing the risk of leaks, and finding new methods of filling the reservoir.

Evelyn and George

One member of the De La Rue family took this challenge very seriously - Evelyn. Evelyn was the son of Thomas Andros, and the great-grandson of the original founder Thomas de la Rue. During the late nineteenth century, Thomas Andros was running the business with an imperious arrogance that eventually was to cost it greatly. He had three sons, of whom Evelyn was the oldest. Evelyn and his father did not always get on, as Evelyn had little head for business and loathed the busy life of the city his father thrived upon. He moved out of the city to Hertfordshire and commuted, once even on foot 'to prove it could be done!'

Nonetheless, Evelyn took after his forbears with his predilection for science and invention. At Cambridge, he wrote a thesis on the theory of relativity - which unfortunately for him was rather overshadowed by a monograph published that year by a Mr Albert Einstein. In a different direction, he published an unpopular children's book - 'the Unicorn



Book of Home-Made Nonsense'. At home, he obsessed over cabinets and motor cars, inventing the 'Eural horn', an attachment for steering wheels so one could make a little 'poop poop' sound while driving.

His obsession at work however was pens. He filed no less than 17 patents in his early years at De La Rue, constantly tinkering around with the designs. He came up with an effective quick-filling method, but was dogged by the complexity of his systems, which required several instructions to use.

It wasn't until another man walked into his office that the most famous De La Rue pen was born.

George Sweetser was a mechanical engineer and cross-dressing roller-skater. He also designed pens, and one day took a model over to Bunhill Row to demonstrate. He met with Evelyn, and was surprised to find Evelyn had a similar design in his own pocket! Challenged by this, George went away to perfect his pen. When he returned with his new model, Evelyn uttered the immortal words, 'I like that', and promptly bought it. As George later commented in an interview - Evelyn was not the most business savvy.

Onoto

This pen was the Onoto, and it became one of De La Rue's most recognisable and well-loved brands, becoming the British market leader in fountain pens for a while.

The design that Evelyn and George had come up with was the original plunger-filling pen. At one end is a plunger, which can be unscrewed. This pulls out the shaft, creating a small vacuum. If the nib is then submerged, the plunger can be pushed down, and ink rushes into the vacuum with a distinctive popping sound. [link to video] This made it incredibly easy to fill!



Of his new pen, George said it could

'not only be filled in a flash and written with, but could be used to syringe your ears, spray the geraniums with insecticide, and it is ideal for "ink-splashes" as it will carry across the room.'

This mechanism was extremely successful - one reviewer described it in a Christmas gift guide in 1911 in extremely favourable terms.

'The British-made Onoto Pen is so simple that a child can fill and use it - so efficient that it is always equal to the task imposed upon it by busy men of affairs. To fill it, all that is necessary is to just unscrew the top, pull it out, dip the nib in the ink, and press home. The pen is then cleaned and filled ready to write 20,000 words without a splutter or blot. It writes so smoothly and evenly directly the nib touches the paper, no jerking nor shaking is necessary to start the ink flowing. '

It was this same mechanism that De La Rue came back to time and again for the next 50 years!

The Pen

The Onoto was not just popular because it was a great pen - it was launched into the world with an unusually generous allowance from Thomas Andros, who allowed Evelyn the princely sum of £50,000 as a marketing budget for the Onoto. In today's real money that would be worth almost £4 million!

A slew of Onoto adverts, show windows, and even a journal followed this marketing effort. The country listened and the pen grew in popularity so much it became known as Onoto The Pen. A number of new pens under the Onoto name were released, as well as other stationery. The early black vulcanite design gave way to colourful marbled and 18 karat gold overlays! The Onoto brand grew into diaries, ink, mechanical pencils, and more.

Onoto went abroad as well, it was marketed in France – and is credited with really boosting the fountain pen market there, and in an attempt to crack the USA market a shop was set up on 262 Broadway, New York!

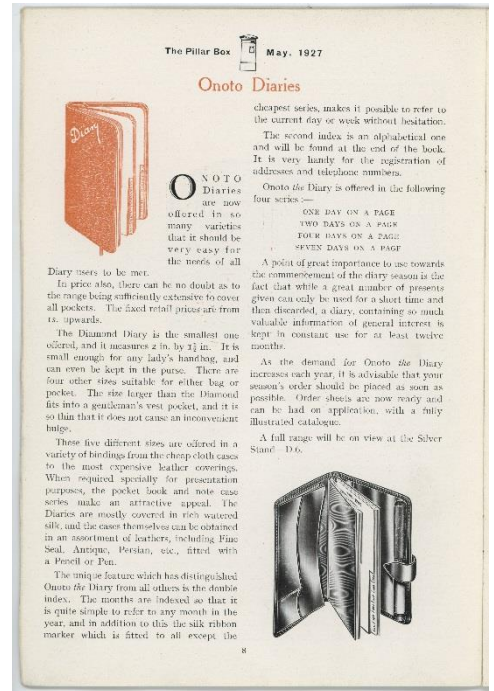
By World War I, the 'made in Britain' concept became particularly important, and the pen was marketed specifically to soldiers as what they should write home with. Field Marshal Earl Haig said of his 'it never failed me'. Another pen was sunk by a German U-Boat and was found in the wreckage nearly 70 years later, and still writes perfectly!

After the war, De La Rue released a journal called the Pillar box which featured a red pillar box and a boy called 'Peter Pen' - the concept being that just as the red pillar box was a British institution, so was the Onoto pen!

As well as Haig, the marketing team made sure that famous holders had pens. Several writers were firm fans of the Onoto – such as Edgar Wallace, Emmeline Morrison, and Natsume Soseki in Japan. Florence Nightingale even used one for her memoirs. And the team made sure that Winston Churchill had one!

Ultimately, in 1958 production, which was at

this point in Strathendry near Fife, was suspended, over 50 years later. The pen business was increasingly unviable in the wake of new innovations, such as the ballpoint. Nonetheless, the names of De La Rue and Onoto are still remembered by pen lovers, not least because they are the only plunger-fillers that are easy to take apart and restore in the modern era. There is consequently a thriving vintage market, as well as the relaunched brand which now does luxury new lines, and vintage restorations. The De La Rue Onoto is counted among the crucial innovations of the pre-war Golden age of the fountain pen!



29 De La Rue
 Left to right: De La Rue c. 1924 (13.3 cm); Onoto c. 1924; Onoto 5601 c. 1936; Onoto 3050 c. 1934; Onoto self-filling c. 1915; Onoto 3050 c. 1932; Onoto 6233 c. 1938; Onoto 6234 c. 1938. Horizontal – top: Onoto self-filling c. 1916 – bottom: Onoto self-filling c. 1919