



PINS, POLITICS, FASHION AND SELF-DEFENCE

The pincushion and its variants from the 17th century to the early 20th century

by Robert Bleasdale

Today, there can be few objects in a home as humble as a pin; they are stored in plastic containers, cardboard boxes, the padded lids of sewing baskets, or a pincushion of some form. Now the pin is associated with dressmaking and needlework, but its origin from the earliest times to the 17th century was almost exclusively linked to clothing.

The word 'pin' is derived from the Latin 'spina' – thorn – and the tree *Paliurus spina-christi* bears large thorns which were used as pins in Egypt. Thorns were scraped and dried and then either boiled or fried in oil to harden them to prevent them from snapping. The Egyptians used fish bones to pin closed the eyes of the dead prior to embalming, and like thorns, bones (either worked or in their natural form) made usable pins. Through the Stone, Iron and Bronze Ages pins continued to develop, used for securing clothing or for creating parcels of food wrapped in leaves. As time progressed pins began to develop crudely decorated heads and they became more sophisticated adornments, eventually developing into the Celtic brooch pin. Pins were also fashioned for hair ornaments.

The pin in its 'modern' form was developed in France where the passion for fashion in the form of veils, wimples, stomachers, lappets, etc demanded vast amounts of pins for a lady's toilet. In England, pin making came under control of The Pinners or Company of Pin-Makers, who were most certainly active around 1376. As with all companies, they sought to protect and control their market and in 1483 the



Photograph of a French 18th century doll showing how the pincushion (centre bottom) and pockets were worn.

Opposite. A spectacular group of pincushions.

(Top) A painted paper butterfly, probably home produced, c.1820, 2½in., believed to be a representation of a rare species, *Camberwell Beauty*; £100-£200.

(Second row, left to right) A ball form velvet pincushion with silver girdle, c.1700; £300-£500. Two fine pin balls, but without personal details, both c.1700; £400-£600 each.

(Third row) Two pin balls, c.1700, both incorporating silver wire, the lower with two needlework pockets attached (see above); first £100-£150, second £500-£800. An amusing pin stuck pea pod, c.1840; £60-£100. (The item on the left is a stiletto, French, c.1830.)

(Fourth row) Two 19th century sampler pin cards, the pins stored around the edge; first £200-£300, second (1845) £300-£500. A pin ball with silver pierced girdle, c.1750; £200-£300.

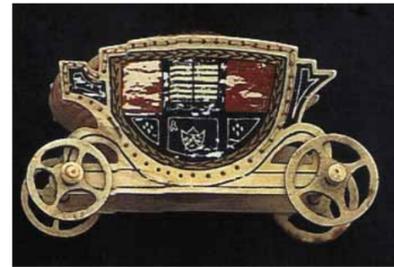
(Bottom row) Knitted pin balls, 1799 and 1742; £500-£800 each. A novelty pin edged thistle, 1850, 4in., designs for these home-made examples appeared in needlework magazines of the day.

import of pins was prohibited by statute. In what today would be seen as a classic case of over-intervention, Henry VIII, by Statute 37, declared 'all "pinnes" are prohibited from being sold, unless they be "double-headed" and their heads soldered fast to the shank of the pinne, well smoothed, the shank well shaven, the point well and round filed, cauted, and sharpened'. This Act was necessary as imported pins were often of an inferior quality and their heads had an uncomfortable habit of becoming loose. Despite this the import of pins from France accelerated, and by the reign of James I the foreign trade in pins was so large that it is said to have exceeded £60,000 a year leaving the country.

In 1524 the accounts of Catherine, Countess of Devon, record 'Necessaries for my lady ... a pin case 6d, 1000 white pins, 8d ... ditto black 7d'. The expression 'pin money' at this time denoted the sum of money secured by a husband on his marriage for the expenses of his wife's wardrobe and adornment, but later became recognised as a trivial amount reflecting the use of pins on paper rolls used to make up small amounts of change given out in shops.



(Left) A gilt metal coronation coach, c.1850, 3in., £60-£100. (Right) A funeral carriage, probably modelled on that used for the Duke of Wellington, 4½in., £150-£200.



A bone carriage pincushion with painted decoration, late 18th century, 3¼in. £300-£400.

In 1625 the first pin manufactory of any size was founded in England by John Tilsby in Gloucestershire, an area that became synonymous with pin making, as later did Bristol and Birmingham.

Around the mid-16th century the price of pins began to fall, brass pins were considered best, superseding iron, but the steel wire pin began to develop, they were finer and stronger and – crucially – made a smaller hole. The complex process of making pins, which involved fifteen or so different skilled people, was used by Adam Smith (1723-1790) as an illustration of the importance of the division of labour. By the beginning of the 19th century pin making machines had been developed, which made pins with the domed head with which we are familiar today. The pin, now far from a luxury, became available to all.

As mentioned previously, the 1524 accounts of Catherine, Duchess of Devon, included a pin case, but it was rare at this time for pins to be carried in such containers, instead they were kept in pillows too large for the pocket and, as valuable items, they would be kept locked away in a chest or box and brought to a lady for her toilet. The pillows were square or oblong and the lack of wear on those that survive suggests that few pins were kept on them. These pillows followed the fashionable needlework of the period, embroidered with brightly coloured silks. A 1622 inventory lists 'pin pillowes of cloth for children' and another in 1688 lists

'pyn-pyllows to stycke pynnes on'.

The need to carry a few pins for urgent repairs to costume led to the introduction of the pin case or 'pin poppet' as it was called. This could be any sort of metal or other cylinder container, the pins either loose or stored in a small domed pincushion below a detachable cover. As time progressed these containers were made in many materials – gold, silver, ivory, bone, coral – often elaborately decorated.

By the end of the 17th century the girdle pincushion developed alongside the pincushion as part of the chatelaine. These early pincushions were usually of ball form with a silver or other metal surround and they were suspended from the waist by a cord or ribbon. By the middle of the 18th century this form had developed into the knitted ball. These balls were 'commercially' produced but were also an accessory on which a lady or child could demonstrate their own needlework skills. They often incorporate initials and dates and small motifs such as jardinières of flowers – similar to the style seen on samplers.

It is rare for a pincushion to reflect politics, but the exception to this are the so-called 'Jacobite pincushions', created around 1745. The most common, although still rare, is of rectangular form with inward curving sides, woven in bands of blue, yellow and green and inscribed 'God Bless P.C.' and 'Down with The Rump' (see opposite page, top left).



(Left to right) Somewhere near the 'holy grail' for the silver pincushion collector – an articulated muzzled bear, lacking glass eyes and with a few small dents, 3in. tall, Birmingham 1908; £800-£1,200. A seashell souvenir incorporating a colour print of The Great Exhibition, c.1850; £40-£60. Two bone novelties, bellows and an auctioneer's gavel; £40-£60 each. A typical layette or pin stuck pincushion, 1826, 7¼in. square, dates and initials add interest; £60-£100 (more if in mint condition, this example lacks the corner tassel).

These pincushions became popular as far south as Manchester and the wearing of openly supportive tartan waistcoats and plaids caused alarm to the Whigs. The Jacobites issued humorous advice to the Manchester magistrates: 'As for your pincushion makers, I think they should be rigorously chastised, and their works publicly burned, let the pretty misses cry as loud as they will. It is a monstrous shame that such an ancient necessary appendage to the ladies' toilet should be thus Jacobitised and transformed from its primitive use into a variegated tool of faction and sedition.' It is likely that these pin cushions were made in France and imported via Scotland as production on any scale in Scotland or England would have been swiftly halted.

The 19th century saw a much wider development of the pincushion, and although the pursuit of fashionable needlework remained the activity of the upper classes, they were now joined by a growing middle class. At the lower end of the social scale, to be able to stitch and embroider meant women had a better chance of gaining employment as a maid, nanny or servant, as a result most children were taught to sew at an early age. Even a child from a poor family probably had a sewing box, while the higher classes defined their status with the complexity of their sewing box or table, and the number of tools and implements it contained. These boxes and tables emerged in the mid-18th century and as time progressed became more extensively fitted with matching sets of tools and accessories; pin cushions were often built in between the divisions, although occasionally they were removable.

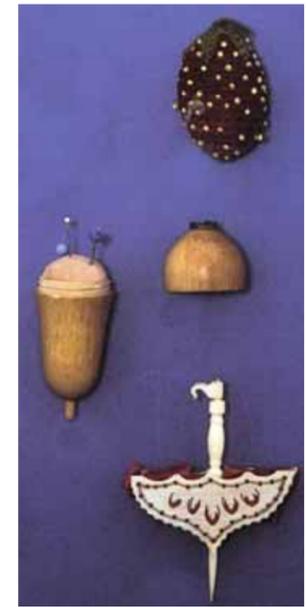
The pincushion was one of the few work-box accessories that could be fashioned by the needlewoman herself and many 'home-made' pincushions were first projects for the budding needlewoman. These could be finely stitched patchwork examples in a variety of shapes or novelties, such as a painted silk playing card with pins stored around the edge. These 'disc' pincushions could be formed into nearly any shape – and formed a 'sandwich' with a cushion between two boards, sewn together to hold it in place, they could be worked with needlework, decorated with beads or painted, providing endless variety.

Commercially produced variants of this pattern could be in carved or pierced ivory or bone, shapes included bellows, musical instruments and wheelbarrows – almost any object could be adapted to form a suitable pin retainer. Printed silks could also be purchased to make commemorative items or souvenirs, those known to exist include one in memory of The Duke of York, 1827, another for William IV and Queen Adelaide as well as several featuring maps. Rarest of the souvenir pincushions are those purchased underground from the Thames Tunnel completed in 1843. Another variant was the pin wheel, almost exclusively in wood with precise drilled holes around the edge into which the pins fitted snugly with just the head visible.

With the expansion of travel in the second half of the 19th century, the souvenir pincushion became a regular feature of shops and bazaars. Many pincushions can be



A rare Jacobite silk pincushion, c.1745, 'God Bless P.C.' (Prince Charlie) and 'Down with The Rump' (Parliament), 3in. x 2in. £1,000-£1,500.



A knitted emery in the form of a strawberry with beaded decoration, c.1860, 1½in.; £40-£60. A wooden acorn form pin poppet, c.1840, 2in.; £40-£60. An unusual bone 'open' parasol, c.1860, 2½in.; £50-£100.

A very fine quality carved ivory pig pincushion, French, c.1830, 2½in. £300-£400.



found in all varieties of Tunbridge ware, produced in Tunbridge Wells, and in Scotland where Mauchline ware manufacturers decorated their wooden wares with titled scenic views; the pincushion produced an ideal moderately priced souvenir of the day trip or holiday. Many were produced as novelties such as a stool with a pincushion top, or a 'disc' type in the form of a heart, Tartan wares were a must for a visit to Scotland, while fern, shell and seaweed transfer wares became popular later. The seashell provided an ideal memento of a seaside trip; shells could be easily adapted with a pincushion either by the ingenious amateur or the enterprising souvenir manufacturer. In Ireland pincushions were formed from bog oak, the most popular forms being the cauldron and harp carved with shamrock and other appropriate motifs. Another popular souvenir was the glass pin disc, one or both sides with a reverse applied transfer view of a church, cathedral or other significant



A silver combined pincushion and thimble holder in the form of a cradle, Birmingham, 1908, 2 1/2 in. £350-£450.



A carved ivory butterfly form pincushion, Canton, c.1820, 2 1/2 in. Note the personalised initials indicating that items like this were ordered direct from Canton by traders in Britain. £100-£150.



A knitted pin ball, dated 1812 and inscribed 'Mrs Clark', bright original colours, but with a little moth damage to the reverse, 1 1/4 in.; £300-£500.

building; atmosphere could be added with moonlight scenes backed by foil. Occasionally one side may be a mirror but always check this is original rather than a replacement for a damaged scene, glass was not best suited to the rigours of the sewing box or basket.

Not surprisingly, the pin itself came to be used as a form of decoration to produce commemorative pincushions. The earliest example of this form, known as 'layette cushions' date from the mid-17th century. A rectangular or square silk cushion was stuck with pins and could incorporate initials, dates and decorative motifs. They became particularly popular in the 19th century as a present for an expectant or young mother, often with a cautionary verse or sentimental inscription, hearts and other motifs; most have a trimmed border or tasselled corners. There is some suggestion that pillows with inscriptions, such as 'Luck In A Lad' or 'Long Live The Dear Child', were intended to be present at the birth for good luck. Almost any event could be recorded in this format – births, marriages and death feature most widely and the repetition of some designs suggests that the cushions were commercially produced with a printed or inked pattern to be followed. Another variant of this form is the soldier's pincushion, mostly heart shaped and large they are crammed with pins securing glass beads and similar ornaments, and often include an inscription. They were intended for sweethearts and must have been commercially produced rather than, as some suggest, the work of regimental tailors.

Towards the end of the 19th century, silver pincushions

became very popular, as did table pincushions, some for hat pins rather than toilet pins, but it is the smaller figural pincushions that are most sought after today. Almost every type of animal can be found – elephants, pigs and chicks emerging from eggshells being the most common, but kangaroos and other 'exotics' are rare. Shoes, baskets, crowns and other objects were also produced with versions in base metals for the less well-off.

Inevitably, pincushions were also incorporated into multi-purpose tools or combinations. Sewing clamps that could be attached to a table to keep material taut while being worked on often incorporated a pincushion. Other combinations include the pedestal form, incorporating a pincushion, needlecase, waxer and tape measure. The emery was a companion to the pincushion; often modelled as a small fruit and executed in felt or silk, these are identified by their weight as they contain emery to clean lightly rusted needles and pins.

In an article of this nature it is impossible to cover the variety of pincushions produced, but that in itself identifies them as a valuable source for the collector. While commercially made examples will inevitably be found in numbers, the 'home-made' will provide an endless source of new acquisitions. Prices are modest, except for the early examples or those formed from valuable materials. Most pincushions can be purchased for between £20 and £50, silver animals and other variants start at around £50 for a small chick in an egg, to £1,000 for the rarer animals and forms. Embroidered pin pillows from the 17th century will



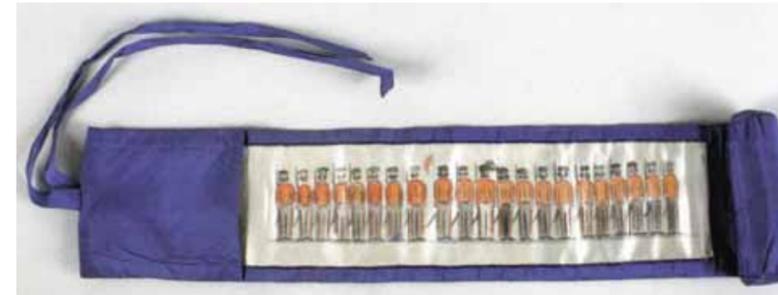
A bone bucket form pincushion 'A Present From Leamington', with floral painted decoration, 2 in. high. Leamington was a Spa town, like Bath, and gained Royal status in 1838. Note the original velvet 'pumpkin' top. £50-£80.



A Tunbridge stickware teapot pincushion of popular novelty form, c.1830, 3 in. wide. £80-£150.



A fish pincushion, c.1830, covered in fine net to imitate scales and with the ingenious use of pins to form fins and other details, 3 1/4 in. £50-£80.



Home-made at its best. A wonderful blue silk needle roll incorporating a pin bolster at the end, each hand painted soldier has a pin bayonet, c.1860, 12 1/2 in. x 2 1/4 in. open. £100-£150.

Right. A Tunbridge ware rosewood pin disc in the form of a table, c.1840, the pin heads visible around the table edge, lovely carved decoration to the pedestal and base, 3 1/4 in. diameter. £200-£300.

Right. A fine French pin poppet, pierced and carved ivory, incorporating a calendar to the lower section, c.1830, 2 1/2 in. high. Note the flaming hearts carved below the pincushion, indicating a gift between lovers. £300-£500.



range from £300 to £3,000 and more, dependant on condition and size. Knitted pin balls are moving rapidly in value and few will be found under £300 with those in good condition and well decorated pushing the upper hundreds. There are almost no fakes, the variety and relatively low values making this an area of little interest to the faker or improver, but be aware that pincushions could often be reworked from earlier fabrics and the date of the fabric may not represent the date of manufacture of the cushion.

It may be assumed that the pincushion was the sole territory of the fairer sex but my favourite is the personal pincushion of George Stephenson (1781-1848), the railway engineer. It can be found at The National Railway Museum and, like many pincushions, it tells an intriguing story. In early life Stephenson was an engine man, sitting, listening to his pit head engine, with long shifts and idle hands he taught himself to make and repair clogs and shoes for the miners and later extended this additional source of income by mending clothes. He developed a liking for needlework and an engraving shows him teaching needlework to the two daughters of the great Quaker capitalist, Edward Pease. Apparently he was never without his pincushion, placing it safely with him alongside his pocket watch each day.

Samuel Pepys gives a fascinating insight into the use of pins by the fairer sex with which to close. On 18th August 1666, he wrote: 'Turned into St. Dunstan's Church, where I heard an able sermon of the minister of the place; and stood by a pretty, modest maid, whom I did labour to take by the hand, but she would not, but got further from me;

and at last I could perceive her to take pins out of her pocket to prick me if I should touch her again – which seeing I did forbear, and was glad I did spy her design.'



Three patchwork pincushions of home-made form, two with beaded decoration; £30-£50 each. An emery cushion; £30-£40.

Robert Bleasdale was previously Regional and Group Managing Director of Bonhams and now runs Bleasdales Ltd which holds specialist sales of sewing tools and related items.

