



## THE RULE OF THUMB, AN ELL AND A NAIL

### *The development of the tape measure in sewing*

by Robert Bleasdale

In earliest times, simple sewing tools were fashioned from natural materials such as a needle from a fish bone or thorn. As civilisation developed the materials varied but the range of sewing tools remained almost static. By the 15th century bronze thimbles were becoming common, but tools such as scissors were still rare, a knife being more common.

Elizabeth I had 'a nedell case of cristall garnysshed with silver gilt, with two thimbles in it', but sewing for pleasure was an activity for the wealthy, tools for everyday work were limited and poor. Those who had wealth displayed it by keeping their valuables on a chain or chatelaine suspended from the waist, sporting a dagger, watch, keys and other 'luxury' goods. By the 18th century the chatelaine had become a common

method for a lady to carry her valuable necessities, including her essential sewing tools. These chatelaines, often elaborate and made of precious materials such as gold and agate, carried cased scissors, a cased thimble, needlecase, pincushion and other essentials, but the focus of this article – the tape measure – doesn't appear on a chatelaine until the early 19th century. Why?

#### **The development of measurement**

The earliest recorded form of any standardised measurement was the cubit which was used in primitive construction in Egypt as early as 8000 BC. The cubit was the length of a forearm to a fingertip – clearly this was a variable unit unless measured from the same arm. Other early units of measurement were also based on

body parts, the foot and the thumb – hence the expression 'a rule of thumb.'

In England the unit of measurement was standardised in the 12th century by Henry I who decided it should be a yard or 36 inches – the length of his arm. This measurement was held at local Guildhalls in the form of a stick from which others could be made; it was known as a 'meteyard' or 'yard stick'. The sticks were subdivided by letters at lines, 'Y' representing the whole yard, 'HY' a half yard, 'Q' a quarter yard, 'HQ' half a quarter yard and 'N' measured a nail or 2¼ inches.

In England, Parliament authorised the Imperial Standard Yard in 1855 and



Above, left to right. An English silver filigree tape, c.1780, in this case the loop at the top of the dome is the winder rather than a loop for a chatelaine. £80-£120. A silver chatelaine tape with coffee-grinder style handle, Chester 1905. £50-£80.

Right. An English silver filigree combination tape measure and thimble, c.1780, note the printed tape with trailing leaves, the thimble unscrews to reveal a glass scent bottle. £300-£600.

its subdivision into feet and inches, this was a reaction to the wider use of feet and inches, rather than the impetus for it. In Western Europe the common unit of measurement was the Ell, the length from the elbow to the fingertip or from the shoulder to the wrist. In Holland the measuring stick was known as an 'Ellemaat' and they were made in different sizes – the quarter, the half and the whole. They had a turned handle, simple inlay or carving for the divisions and often incorporated the thumb as a unit (an inch).

Across the world there were clearly problematic differences in the units of measurement. A degree of international uniformity occurred with the introduction of metric measurement in 1799,



A wonderful Tunbridge stick ware combination tape measure with a waxer to the base and pin cushion to the top. Note the original tape end. The value is enhanced by the perfect printed label on the base for Thomas Barton. £150-£200.



Two white wood early Tunbridge ware tape measures, one as a circular cottage and the other a turret or folly. These wonderfully decorated tapes often include details such as a rake leaning against the wall or a bird cage. Both c.1800-30. £60-£100 each.

although the centimetre was not widely adopted until the end of the 19th century. A pressing need for standardisation was stimulated by the development of international trade.

The measuring stick became a household item used at the door to measure cloth and material purchased from travelling salesmen. As opportunities for trade and shopping developed it became an inconvenient tool. The markings from the household stick were transferred to a ribbon which could be rolled and conveniently carried. When the ribbon wore out a new one was re-marked from the stick, short and long strokes representing inches and feet. As silk and other ribbons were fragile it became common to roll the tape and keep it protected in a small cylindrical container. The portable tape measure had come into being.

#### **Early tapes**

Although inventories in the 17th century occasionally list tape measures they were in the possession only of the wealthy elite. By the mid-18th century tape measures became more common, in the form of a marked ribbon stored in a cylindrical container (usually of silver) and wound by a simple spindle projecting through the top, the tape end emerging from a slit in the side. Other popular early shapes are the barrel or ball. Occasionally,

winders are of the coffee-grinder type, and a suspension loop to the top indicates use on a chatelaine.

By the end of the 18th century needlework, as opposed to sewing, was a fashionable recreation for the middle class and wealthy. The range of tools began to expand well beyond the facility of the chatelaine. As a social group activity needlework was very much a female recreation and an opportunity to display skills and show off the tools and trappings that went with them.



A Tunbridge end-grain mosaic tape measure wound by the overhanging top, c.1850. Note the printed name 'Nye'. Although the tape lacks its last inch it still has the delicately turned tape end – so much care over something so trivial. £50-£80.





Three Mauchline ware tape measures. Note the photographic image on the centre example as opposed to transfers on the other two. Bell £60-£100; cylinder £40-£60; churn £50-£80.



(Left to right) A cowrie shell tape measure c.1850; a vegetable ivory example with typical pierced and carved decoration, c.1860; and a boxwood drum form example with coffee-grinder handle. £60-£100; £30-£50; £20-£40.

**The evolution of the work box and sewing table**

Many readers will be familiar with the stumpwork caskets that emerged in the 17th century. Contrary to popular opinion these were not sewing boxes in which to store sewing tools and work in progress, they were caskets to store precious possessions. While this might have included a thimble and a few other tools, they were equally used for documents, 'toys' and other important personal items. The panels were executed to printed designs and sent to London to be made up and housed in an outer plain box for protection when travelling. The execution of a casket was considered a necessary

skill for a young woman of substance.

By the mid-18th century sewing tables and boxes began to appear. Often they had a lift-out tray neatly and uniformly divided, but tools, cottons and silks were not mass-produced and such boxes contained a random assortment of collected tools.

Towards the end of the 18th century boxes began to contain sets of tools in matching materials – gold, silver, ivory, pearl and bone. By the 1830s the tape measure had become part of a set of tools and was arranged towards the front of the box as part of a trio of uniform cylinders: the tape measure, the waxer used for waxing thread, and

the emery used for cleaning lightly rusted needles. Alongside these the box would often contain a matching set of six or eight reels for cottons and other tools en suite.

By the 1830s the Industrial Revolution and the evolution of travel had taken effect. There was virtually no material that wasn't fashioned into a tape measure container, and specialist manufacturers, as well as more individual craftsmen, sought to bring new models to the market.

**Souvenir tapes**

Many tapes exist manufactured in Tunbridge ware. Tunbridge Wells had become a fashionable spa town following the discovery of chalybeate waters in the 17th century. Local craftsmen first developed plain wooden white wares decorated with painted lines and small inscriptions applied in the form of oval or circular labels. More decorative wood ware emerged in the form of inlaid van dykes and cubes and then in end-grain mosaic. Pictures and patterns could be built up from different coloured square sticks and sliced off in the same way the lettering goes through a stick of rock. The stick ware and end-grain techniques provided a perfect format for sewing tools to be purchased as



A turned and pierced bone cylinder tape measure, the spindle with a ball finial incorporating a 'Stanhope' or 'peep', c.1880. £50-£80.



A bone combination double-ended pedestal pincushion surmounted by a tape, probably French, c.1850. £80-£120.



A gilt brass novelty tape measure in the form of the coronation coach, the tape emerging underneath and wound from the top. £80-£120.

identifiable souvenirs of a visit, and tape measures were no exception. Occasionally one can find a Tunbridge tape with the manufacturer's name printed at the start of the tape.

Mauchline and tartan ware were equally popular. Although manufactured in Scotland, pieces were sold all over the country. Mauchline ware, of varnished sycamore, was decorated with transfer prints, and later, photographs of holiday and other locations. The turned wooden containers themselves could be in the form of a barrel, ball, skittle, milk churn or other novelty form. The vogue for tartan brought about by Queen Victoria's



Two brass novelties: a lion and ball (note the tape in centimetres) and an elephant wound from the tail. Lion £40-£60; elephant £60-£100.

interest in Scotland and tartan wares became another perfect format for a whole range of sewing tools; these often have a small gilt label identifying the name of the tartan used.

Shells were also used to make souvenir tapes. These are usually a

small cowrie shell, the tape wound by a spindle and emerging through the natural aperture of the shell or a slit cut in the surface. These must have been commercially produced judging by the numbers that exist and the ingenuity of their construction.



A fine rosewood sewing box with lower writing drawer. Note the three cylinders divided by thimbles at the centre front: tape measure, waxer and emery. The silver fittings dated for London, 1847. Sold for £3,840.







Two celluloid novelties, a hat and galleon. £30-£50 each.

**Silver-cased tapes**

Among the most collectable of the silver-cased tape measures are the filigree examples, which seem to have emerged as early as the 1760-80 period. They are occasionally found in combination with a thimble, the thimble unscrewing from a circular base to reveal a small facet-cut scent bottle. Examples with original tape, bottle and stopper are rare. Other popular silver shapes were of cylinder and octagonal section; these could be cast or engraved with flowers or birds, or left in simple forms such as acorns. All these patterns and shapes were also created in ivory, bone or mother-of-pearl, the cylinder form with an overhanging circular top that would act as the winding mechanism, or with a central top-mounted spindle winder.

Like the silver filigree tape/thimble/scent, the tape measure could form part of a combination tool. Many of these were in bone, ivory or one of the so-called 'vegetable ivories' – the coquilla and the corozo nut. Coquilla comes from the Brazilian palm tree, *Attalena finifera* and was an ideal substance to turn, carve or pierce. Corozo is the hard albumen of the seed found in the nut of the South

American palm *Phytelephas macrocarpa*. Each nut is roughly ten inches in diameter and when cut open the seeds resemble ivory but after exposure to light become a warm honey colour.

Combination tools include the cylinder needle case surmounted by a tape measure, double-ended cylinder pincushions incorporating a central tape, or pedestal forms, the stem to take a reel of cotton below a pincushion surmounted by a tape or the tape included in the pedestal.



Three vegetable ivory tapes. Those left and centre incorporate 'Stanhopes' or 'peeps' in the ball finials. Typical turned, pierced and carved decoration. (Left to right) £30-£50; £40-£60; £30-£50.

Vegetable ivory tapes may also include 'Stanhopes', normally incorporated into the winding spindle, and developed by Charles Stanhope, 3rd Earl of Stanhope, who was born in 1753. He invented a powerful microscope lens, basically a circular glass rod about 3mm in diameter, convex at one end and flat at the other. With the advent of micro photography it became possible to include single or multiple images viewable when the 'peep' was held to the light.

**The Palais Royal**

Of all sewing tools sought by collectors those manufactured at the Palais Royal are the most desired. The Palace was built for Cardinal Richelieu in 1629 and upon his death it passed to the French Royal Family. In the 18th century it was rebuilt as a place of recreation and then again in 1804 when Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor. This time three sides of the courtyard incorporated shops, selling only the finest craftsmen-made wares. Palais Royal boxes were often fashioned exclusively from mother-of-pearl, in gilt

metal frames with matching tools fitting tightly into the elaborate tray; some tools carried the enamel pansy motif. Many of the tools are superbly crafted and carved, and while tape measures include the usual cylinder forms, there was a fashion in the Palais Royal boxes for folding and fixed mother-of-pearl rules.

**Novelties**

By the mid-19th century, sewing and needlework was fashionable with all classes, the wealthy had elaborate



An English silver ribbed cylinder tape measure, c.1820, with coffee-grinder handle, and an English floral scroll cylinder tape measure, c.1840. £60-£100 each.



A bone cylinder tape measure with overhanging mother-of-pearl top (sometimes known as a 'mop top'). Typical of the form that fitted into boxes as trios. £30-£50.

craftsmen-made tools but the working classes had access to a whole host of machine-made tools. The novelty tape measure was mass-produced and cheap.

Every conceivable form seems to have emerged – copies of household items in copper and other metals, teapots, chocolate pots, coffee grinders, watering cans, irons and garden rollers. Other popular subjects include hats, shoes, rollerskates, clock cases, musical instruments, buildings (actual and imaginary), motor cars, bathing huts and even a zeppelin, many of which were made in Germany. The novelty value was only enhanced when a tape measure in the form of a donkey or a pig could be wound by its tail, or a fruit had a tape end modelled as a fly – the opportunities were endless.

The evolution of moulding techniques in celluloid in the 1920s (although invented much earlier) only served to increase the number of novelties available; most were again made in Germany where ceramic examples were also manufactured. The market for celluloid tapes moved to Japan in the 1930s and their advanced modelling techniques led to the introduction of realistic fruits, figures and heads (including easily identifiable politicians, celebrities and ethnic minorities), birds, animals, fish, insects, bouquets and baskets of flowers – no subject or object was safe from being converted into a tape measure case.

These novelty tapes often involved a feature first developed in the 1860s and which replaced the spindle winder: a spring activated retractor which auto-



(Left to right) A bone tape measure, c.1840; a turned wooden pear, c.1880; and a turned rosewood cylinder tape measure. £40-£60 each.

matically re-wound the tape. This mechanism was later refined so the tape stayed out until the button was pressed. As anyone who has enthusiastically pushed the button will know, the result is pleasing until the end stop flies off and the tape disappears forever within the mechanism!

**Values and fakes**

There are a few tape measures that will cost more than £100 but many are available in the £25-£50 range. As in any collecting field quality is the usual key to value and even a Palais Royal tape measure can be found for less than £100. An exception to the quality rule is scarcity, some novelty examples such as zeppelins and cars, although cheaply made are rare and difficult to find and can command prices in excess of £100. Points that add to value are: the original complete tape in good condition starting at 0 not 1; the original tape end; markings in nails or handwritten rather than the more common printed feet and inches or centimetres. Replacement tapes are often gaudy and crudely marked and rarely include any form of numerals or lettering.

There are very few fakes on the market, however there are a number of 'bone' tapes with scrimshaw-type decoration that started to appear ten

years ago and have become more prevalent recently in the form of animals – crocodiles and rabbits.

**Further reading**

Nerylla Taunton, *Antique Needlework Tools and Embroideries*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1997  
 Kay Sullivan, *Needlework Tools and Accessories – A Dutch Tradition*, Antique Collectors' Club, 2004  
 Genevieve. E. Cummins and Nerylla. D. Taunton, *Chatelaines – Utility to Glorious Extravagance*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1994



A group of early printed Tunbridge ware showing typical printed labels. The sewing clamp to fix to a table with pin cushion top and incorporating a tape measure, £120-£180. (Front) A girdle pincushion, £50-£80. (Left) A double-ended example, £50-£80.

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