

The use of quill, patent and steel pens by the Bank of England during the nineteenth century

Quill pens were an important item for the Bank in the early nineteenth century. As can be seen from the table on page 211, annual expenditure on pens averaged well over £2,000 a year between 1800 and 1820 – perhaps around £10,000 a year in today's money. At the peak around 1810, the Bank were buying over one and a half million pens each year. With a staff of under one thousand, each clerk must therefore have used about five pens every working day. The annual expenditure on pens – something over £2 per clerk – may be compared with the starting salary of an eighteen-year-old clerk in 1810 of £20 a year and the average salary of an experienced clerk of around £100 a year.

It was therefore not surprising that, in 1822, the Bank's Committee for the House and Servants looked into the cost of the pens supplied to them. For the previous fifty years quills had been obtained from the firm of Walsh, (father and son) and, according to Mr. Walsh, junior, the prices of the different qualities of quill had not changed since the Bank had moved from the Grocers' Hall in Poultry to Threadneedle Street in 1734. There were four grades:

Best Parlour	10s.	per hundred
Second Parlour	5s.	„
Seconds	3s. 6d.	„
Common	2s. 8d.	„

The actual number of quill pens given out for use in the Bank in a year was in the region of 1,700,000 in 1807–08 and for the year ended 1st March 1822 Mr. Walsh had supplied 950,250. Old pens had a cash value of 1s. per hundred, and in 1822, 557,250 were returned and the resulting £278:12:6 was paid to the Fund for Clerks' Widows.

The Committee for the House and Servants, on investigation, discovered that both Mr. Miller of Cheapside and Mr. Morrell of Fleet Street could supply quill pens for considerably less than the Bank were then paying. Mr. Walsh was called in to explain his charges and he began by saying that he had had to pay high prices for quills during the Napoleonic War. He admitted that there had since been a fall of from 20%–30% in prices but he tried to justify his charges by stating that the pens were better made and that the quills themselves were of a superior quality. To support his case, Mr. Walsh brought with him a Mr. Walford of the firm of Terry & Walford, wholesale quill merchants, of Crane Court, Fleet Street. Mr. Walford, however, could add little to what had already been said except that the quills for the Bank were "peculiarly manufactured, and when made into pens are all cut to about one third of the quill to get at the strongest part". Mr. Pettit, the Storekeeper, was asked his opinion as to whether the pens had improved. He thought they had. He also considered that a cheaper variety of pen would not be economical, and suggested that "a still better quill than those used in the Stock Offices" would be practical

as the clerks would take more care of them. He thought that the common pens supplied to the clerks were much inferior to those used by the bankers (by order of the Governor, a superior quality was provided for the bankers and merchants at the times of signing warrants in the stock offices for payment of dividends).

What particularly interested the Committee was the patent pen invented by Joseph Bramah in 1809 (Pat. Spec. 23 Sept. 1809 No. 3260) which was being marketed by the company then under the management of the inventor's eldest son.

In his article on Joseph Bramah, H. W. Dickinson made the following remarks on the type of pen invented by Bramah:¹

What turned his attention to pens was probably the patent of Bryan Donkin of 1808 (No. 3118) for making steel nibs, some examples of whose pens are preserved in the Science Museum, South Kensington. Mr. Harry J. Donkin stated [in a letter to *The Times*, 18th September 1930] that this patent was sold 'I believe to his friend Joseph Bramah.' We do not learn, however, that Bramah exploited this patent; what he patented was much simpler and consisted merely in cutting up a quill into from two to eight pieces to form nibs and to use these in a penholder, thus economising quill material and obviating, what was irksome, the task of mending a pen with a penknife. He cut the nibs to shape and cracked the slits with a V-shaped knife tool in a fly-press.

In May 1822, the Chief Cashier stated to a newly-formed Committee to Investigate the Household Charges and Expenditure, that he had carried out a trial of the patent Bramah pens in his own office, as he had found that the common pens were "very indifferent". He was in favour of the Bramah pens as they were better to use and would outlast five of the third quality (seconds) of the quills, which cost 3s. 6d. per hundred against 3s. a hundred for the Bramah. Trials had also been made in the Private Drawing Office, the Bill Office, the Post Bill Office and the Dividend Warrant Office with, presumably, much the same findings. The Chief Accountant does not seem to have been so go-ahead, however, as he had not tried out the Bramah pens in any office in his department except the Journal Office, where there were only two clerks, possibly rather conservative ones, who preferred the ordinary quills. He had to admit, however, that bankers and merchants complained so bitterly of the pens supplied by the Bank when they came to sign warrants in the stock offices that, as already mentioned, he had arranged on the Governor's instructions for a better quality to be put out for them. He was asked by the Committee to try out the Bramah pens in one of the large offices in his department.



Bramah's quill pen nibs and holders, 1809.

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¹ H. W. Dickinson, "Joseph Bramah and his Inventions" in *The Transactions of the Newcomen Society for the Study of History of Engineering and Technology*, Volume XXII, 1941-2, London, 1946.

By June, Mr. Walsh had rather grudgingly reduced the prices of his quill pens by 1s. a hundred for the Best Parlour, 8d. a hundred for the Second Parlour, 6d. a hundred for Seconds and 4d. a hundred for the Common. This would deprive him, he said, of a great part of his present small profit. His bill for pens for the year ending Lady Day 1822 was £1,332:1:—.

These price reductions were not enough. When they met on 12th June 1822, the Committee to Investigate Household Charges and Expenditure felt confident that they did not exaggerate when they stated that the general use of Bramah's pens would result in a saving of fully 50%. They directed therefore that the Heads of Offices were to use the patent pens "to the utmost practicable extent". No others would in future be used by the clerks "although a few Common Pens will still be required for the Public in the Stock Offices".

Later in the month it was decided by the Court of Directors that the principle of open competition should be adopted for the supply of pens, stationery and oil. In respect of pens, however, "open competition" was limited to the requirements for quill pens, Mr. Walsh being tactfully invited by the Secretary to "desist sending the usual supply of pens, and to wait for further orders thereon". Mr. Bramah, on the other hand, was informed that the Bank would be turning over to the use of his patent pen. As a great number of these would be required, it was suggested that the existing price of 4s. 2d. for a penholder and 3s. per hundred for the nibs might be reduced somewhat. Like Mr. Walsh before him, Mr. Bramah explained that he made "scarcely any profit or very little". His patent was shortly to expire but he was confident that his prices could not be undercut. They could, and in less than a month, they were. Nibs were offered at 2s. and 1s. 6d. per hundred against his price of 3s. 6d. and 2s. 9d. per hundred but he asserted that the quality of his competitors' products was inferior. He could hardly say this of the holders which were "strongly mounted with silver at 2s. 1d. each". His own are also referred to as "silver holders" and had already been reduced by a thought-provoking margin from 4s. 2d. to 2s. 8d. each.

Apparently, however, Bramah was able to satisfy the Bank that his pens and holders were an economical proposition, for there is no reference to any other firm supplying patent pens, and by September 1822 65,800 Bramah pens had been delivered. In 1826, comparative figures for two quarters show that whereas 11,450 and 15,000 of Mr. Walsh's quill pens were given out, the figures for Bramah pens were 99,200 and 113,100.

Nevertheless the Bramah pens do not appear to have been an unqualified success. In 1828, the Storekeeper informed the Committee to Investigate the Household Charges and Expenditure that with regard to pens, "those supplied by Messrs. Bramah are so little estimated by the Clerks, that they most commonly use those delivered by Mr. Walsh (and which are allowed for their own private consumption)". This last remark was a reference to the quarterly allowance made by the Bank to each clerk of 50 pens, 1 stick of sealing wax,

1 pencil, 1 quire of foolscap and 1 quire of "post" (a paper of quarto size used for correspondence).

In March 1828 a Mr. Palmer of St. James's Street made an offer to supply the Bank with "portable pens similar to those now furnished by Messrs. Bramah, but at much the same prices, only with an allowance of 15 per cent Discount for Cash". Messrs. Bramah were informed of this challenge and as no orders were given to Mr. Palmer it must be assumed that Mr. Bramah was able to counter the proposition either by discount or superior quality.

The use of the Bramah pen by the Bank continued until 1845 when the last purchase, £10 worth, is shown in the accounts for 30th May. The minutes of the Committee for the House and Servants, dated 20th November 1845, show that 5,200 of the patent pens were given out during the last quarter, but after that there are no further quotations of the number of pens "delivered out" of whatever sort.

As early as 1831 a competitive product had made its appearance in the Bank: £7:4:- is recorded as having been spent on steel nibs in that year. The table shows the rapid growth in their use in the following decade; and a letter from the storekeeper reproduced at the end of this article indicates the predominance of the steel nibs by 1844.⁷

Despite the success of the steel nibs and the total eclipse of the Bramah patent pen, the quill pen proper still had a very long run in the Bank. The firm of Henry Hill & Sons Ltd. supplied "Quill pens, Sealing Wax, etc" for many years, and although the entries in the accounts do not always specifically mention the quills, a definite purchase is referred to as late as August 1907.

Quill, patent and steel pens: extracts from the Bank's records

Year	Cost			Number of pens used			Number of pens for clerks' private use	Total staff employed
	Quill £	Patent £	Steel £	Quill	Patent	Steel		
1793	1,206	—	—	—	—	—	—	
1800	2,233	—	—	—	—	—	—	672
1810	2,417	—	—	1,513,675	—	—	—	897
1820	2,021	—	—	1,260,725	—	—	—	1,002
1822	769	405	—	424,475	182,700	—	—	
1830	232	425	—	50,925	401,500	—	—	874
1831	182	345	20	47,550	325,800	—	—	
1836	223	282	54	53,250	268,200	14,532	73,750	
1840	197	80	313	68,350	109,500	59,565	111,256	871
1845	72	15	153	63,775	22,000	81,144	34,632	
1846	107	—	174	No longer quoted				
1850	89	—	152					892
1860	27	—	151					922
1870	7	—	124					978
1880	13	—	87					1,144
1890	61	—	151					1,357
1900	32 ^a	—	133					1,311
1910	—	—	117					1,401
1911	—	—	124					
	Detailed accounts cease							

^a Refers to "Quill pens and sealing wax etc."

⁷ Extracted from the minutes of a meeting of the Committee for the House and Servants held on 28 June 1844.

"Storekeepers Office, Bank
"1st June 1844."

"Sir,

. . . "I beg respectfully to submit the propriety of a change in the
"private allowances of Paper and Pens made quarterly to the Clerks."

Stores proposed to
be delivered in
future to the Clerks

"At present each receives per quarter $\frac{1}{2}$ hundred Quill
"Pens, 1 Quire Foolscap and 1 Quire Post Paper, the pens will seldom
"write, being of the commonest quality and the foolscap paper as well
"as the pens are as a favor frequently exchanged, as generally more
"acceptable to the Clerks. I propose to deliver for the Quill Pens,
"1 Doz: Steel Pens, and for the foolscap, another Quire of Post."

. . . "The Price paid for Gillotts Steel Pens and Nibs has been
"4/6 per Gross net, by a different method of supplying the latter the
"price in future will be for Nibs 2/3. A proposition has been made
"to Mr. Gillott to charge an uniform price of 3/9 which would save much
"trouble, and either way a saving will be effected of about £25 per
"ann:"

Steel Pens recomm^d:
for the Public in future
instead of Quill.

"I would also propose that Steel pens be supplied to the
"different Offices for the use of the Public, instead of Quill Pens,
"the latter are constantly complained of although the Cost is great,
"nearly 50,000 being used at 45/- – £112.10, the common quality being
"only 15/-"¹

. . . "I am Sir, with respect

"Your obed^t: Serv^t:"

"Samuel Harrison"

"To W^m. Marshall Esq.

"Chief Cashier etc."

¹ The prices of 45/- and 15/- quoted here are per thousand compared with prices per gross in the previous paragraph.