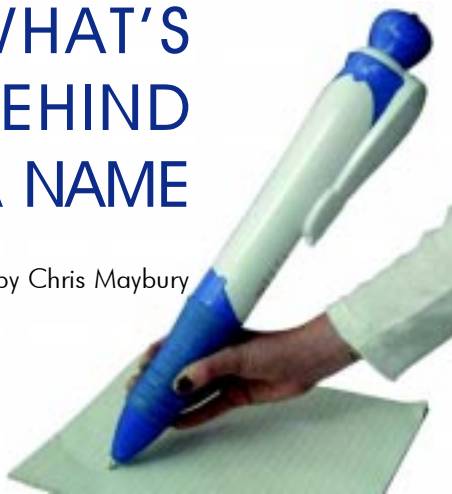


WHAT'S BEHIND A NAME

by Chris Maybury



We are all familiar with household names, which become adopted and adapted for everyday conversation.

Regular names such as Hoover have been used to mean any generic vacuum cleaner and have developed to become "Hoovering", covering any household vacuum cleaning job. DHL and "DHL'ing" are used to describe generic document courier services.

There is another name that has survived long after the brand name has disappeared and that is Biro.

Even relatively young persons call ballpoint pens "Biros" although most have probably never seen, let alone used a genuine Biro ballpoint pen.

However, there is a long and proud British connection with this originally foreign icon and here are a few notes on the history.

The earliest recorded history of the ballpoint pen dates back to a patent registered during 1888 in the USA. History has proved that there were many unsuccessful attempts to market the design commercially, on the grounds of its inherent unreliability against the conventional fountain pens of the period and, of course, the good old pencil.

Among all those seeking to achieve success with the idea was a Hungarian newspaperman, named László Bíró. During the madness that prevailed throughout Europe in the 1940s, Bíró fled to Buenos Aires where he continued with his experiments.

Bíró made a significant breakthrough when he discovered that it was not only the difficulties of machining the precision ball and socket and selecting the properties of the different materials to be used. For long term success the secret was also discreetly hidden within the properties of the ink itself.

Seeking backing to manufacture and market his new product, Bíró met up with a British Chartered Accountant, one Harry G. Martin.

Martin was keenly interested and could foresee the long term potential of the new pen. He knew that the British Air Ministry were looking for a new device for writing at high altitude and contacted the British Air Attache' in BA. He left a few Biro prototypes, which were sent straight to London.

The "project" lay in a London "ministry drawer" for

many months so a frustrated Martin contacted the United States Army Air Force to promote the new "non-leaking pens."

It was while in Washington, Martin met up with a friend at the British Embassy to explain his frustrations. Within days he was flown to London then to Prestwick to Bomber Command.

Meanwhile, the Americans had tied up a deal with Biro to develop and manufacture the pen for their own Air Force.

A still frustrated Martin returned to London and took one of the Biro prototypes to a businessman friend who had contacts at the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

The MAP took a passing interest and forwarded the project to the Miles Aircraft Company based at Woodley, near Reading, for evaluation. F. G. Miles, the chairman and managing director, himself a pioneer in monoplane design and construction, understood the huge potential of the Biro pen and offered to refine and produce the pen for service with the Royal Air Force.

Materials and labour were in scarce supply at the time but after negotiations with the Ministry of Labour, seventeen of the Miles Aircraft unskilled girls were assigned to the production of the pens. The Board of Trade also sanctioned limited exports of the new pen.

Another of the secrets developed, to enable the original Biro design of pen to work at any angle, was that the ink tube was made in the form of a "U" Tube to balance the effect of gravity and "G" forces experienced in aircraft.

With the cessation of hostilities, a new company was formed under the name of the Miles Martin Pen Company, based in the Reading area. There was a licensing deal drawn up with Bíró himself. The new company employed over seven hundred workers and by 1949 they were producing over 550,000 Biro pens a week but were only just keeping pace with demand.

It is my understanding that the Biro name was eventually sold to Bic, a French concern and I suspect there are still a few example of the old Biro Minor pen "lying around in drawers."

I worked at the old Miles Aircraft site, from 1969 to 1973, then known as Adwest Engineering, engaged in the manufacture of automotive steering gears. Around that time, several of the original prototype pens were found at the back of an old desk drawer, somewhere in the works but they had all long since dried up.



The size of a ballpoint pen's line is determined by the width of the ballpoint. A "point five millimeter" (0.5 mm) pen has a ball that will produce a line that is 0.5-mm wide, and a "point seven millimeter" pen (0.7 mm) has a ball that will produce a 0.7-mm line. Ballpoints come as tiny as "point one millimeter" wide ("ultra fine").