



Brass ink well in the form of a grotesque devil or imp. c1890 – 1900
Eden Valley Museum Archives

Brass Ink Well

Writing letters was a popular past time in the Victorian era and especially after the arrival of the Penny Post. Pride of place on a lady's escritoire was an ink well or ink stand and they were often very decorative. Brass ink wells often depicted the head of an animal and sometimes served a dual purpose as, perhaps, a match striker or stand for a pocket watch. The brass ink well shown here is a mass-produced item of the late 1800s and was originally owned by Mrs Ellen Withers who lived at Somerton Cottages in Chiddingstone during the mid - 20th century.

The Victorians were endlessly fascinated by ghost stories, legends and the supernatural. A terrifying creature called the Devil imp was a much-favoured theme of Victorian writers and illustrators. Edgar Alan Poe's grinning devil in the belfry 'had a long hooked nose, pea eyes, a wide mouth, and an excellent set of teeth', much like Mrs Withers' ink well. Not all imps were scary though. The legend of the Lincoln imp

tells of a mischievous imp who attempted to cause havoc in Lincoln Cathedral. His antics were promptly terminated when an angel appeared from a bible on the altar and transformed him into stone. The grotesque of the Lincoln imp was popularised by James Ward Usher, a Victorian businessman who acquired the rights to use the motif in his new range of jewellery. The Lincoln Imp continued to feature on brass souvenirs such as spoons and candlesticks well into the 1920s.



Mrs Withers' ink well has two hollow ears which serve as holders for dip pens. People still used quill pens in the early part of the Victorian era but

these were eventually superseded by steel nib pens by the 1850s. In Edenbridge, dip pens were still used in schools until the 1960s, as they were in many rural locations because they were cheaper than fountain pens. Dip pen nibs were prone to rust and sprayed ink if accidentally pressed in the wrong direction whilst writing. They were also rather scratchy. Until the invention of the ink cartridge in the 1950s ink wells, blotting paper, nibs and pen wipes all had to be taken on holiday too.



The Lincoln Imp in the triforium of the Angel Choir of Lincoln Cathedral.

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Wooden handled dip pens with metal nibs used by children at Marsh Green school, c1959.

Eden Valley Museum Archives

Ink was originally made from 'lamp black', a mixture of soot, gum arabic and water. The ink tended to flake off the paper after a while, so vinegar was used as a fixative. Iron gall ink, made from iron salts and tannic acid was commonly used in the 19th century. Iron gall ink was particularly corrosive to paper and steel nibs. It also faded to brown over time. Fancy writing paper and coloured inks, especially violet was all the rage in the Victorian era but by the end of the century, black ink and plain paper were considered far more fashionable. In schools, ink monitors were appointed to keep ink wells topped up. If ink spilt on fingers or clothes, the affected area could be treated with a home preparation such as lemon juice, tallow or milk.

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