

Dr. Leighton Davies-Smith

PARKER PENMAN INKS

A CLASSIC
CONTEXTUALIZED

MICHAEL W.
HARRIS, PHD,
PICKS THE BRAIN
OF THE CHEMIST
BEHIND PARKER
PENMAN INKS.



There are many legendary objects in the world of pen collecting: the Montblanc Hemingway, the Parker 51 Vacumatic, the Nakaya Dorsal Fin, and the Namiki Emperor—with its sundry maki-e and raden finishes. Beautiful and functional, many come at a high premium but are built to last.

Judged by the standard of novelty and price set by the items above, Parker Penman ink is in a league of its own. While not as expensive as a Nakaya or Montblanc, the ink, long since discontinued, commands prices on the secondary market upward of \$150 for a new old stock, mint-in-box bottle. Ink is a consumable, unlike pens, and while an ink may be worth the price, at some point—like an expensive bottle of wine—it will either run out, evaporate, or go bad.

Despite forums full of rabbit holes and dead ends speculating as to why this highly sought-after ink was discontinued, the librarian/researcher in me was determined to get to the bottom of the mysteries of Parker Penman ink. My sleuthing paid off when I found a blog post that mentioned a 1993 interview from *Pen World* (Vol. 6, No. 6) with the ink's creator, Dr. Leighton Davies-Smith, who came to Parker when its corporate headquarters were based in Newhaven, U.K., not far from where he lived. This article only served to whet my interest, and I knew I had to track him down.

I was able to find an email for Dr. Davies-Smith, and we quickly agreed to a phone call early one Sunday morning. In 1989, armed with a PhD in electrochemistry from the University of Brighton and experience at Duracell, Dr. Davies-Smith initially interviewed at Parker for a position as a material scientist. As he put it, “two jobs were advertised. One was for a material scientist, which was down my street. The other was for an ink chemist. I didn’t even think about that one.”

“I went down to Newhaven to interview, and the very first thing they said was, ‘We’re not interviewing you for the material scientist job, because we’ve just given that to the young lady that came in before you.’ I said, ‘Really? Without even talking to me? I’ve prepared for this interview.’ They said, ‘No, we’re going to interview you for the ink chemist job.’ I said, ‘I know absolutely nothing about ink chemistry. Well, okay, let’s go for it, then!’”

Professionally courteous but personable, Dr. Davies-Smith and I quickly fell into calling one another by our first names. It was soon evident through our discussion that Leighton is a creative problem-solver, which must have come across in the interview with Parker, as he was hired on the spot. Knowing nothing about ink chemistry, he set to learning the ins and outs of inks and pens. Parker set him up with a sort of apprenticeship with a retired ink chemist, Mr. Bell.

“Part of the deal, when I got the job, was there was a retired ink chemist, Mr. Bell,” Leighton said. “He’d long since retired as the ink chemist at Parker, but he lived quite locally. We arranged to meet every Thursday afternoon. I’d just sit down and listen to what he had to say about inks. He was probably about 75 or 80 at that time. Maybe even a little older. Some of those afternoons were long and tedious, but there were also a lot of gems that I picked up from Mr. Bell. At the end of the afternoon, I would have dinner with him and his wife.”

It wasn’t just the chemistry of ink that Leighton was learning; he also gained insight into pen design and functionality:

“Eventually, I became not just the ink chemist but also expanded into the writing system engineer role. The writing system is the ink formulation, the delivery system, and the writing tip or nib. How you get the ink from one place to another, fluid dynamics—that type of stuff. That’s what I spent most of my career doing with Parker Pen. That’s where it all started. I was the only PhD scientist in Parker at the time. Everybody else was an engineer. I owe them a debt of gratitude, because anything I know about engineering today all came from my interactions with the fine people at Parker.”

Leighton’s eureka moment was in the realization that one must think holistically about ink and pen. “We were charged with developing a gel-ink refill for Parker, which is still on the market today, I think. I say ‘we’ because it was me on the ink side. I was developing the gel ink and there was a guy who was developing the writing tip. We

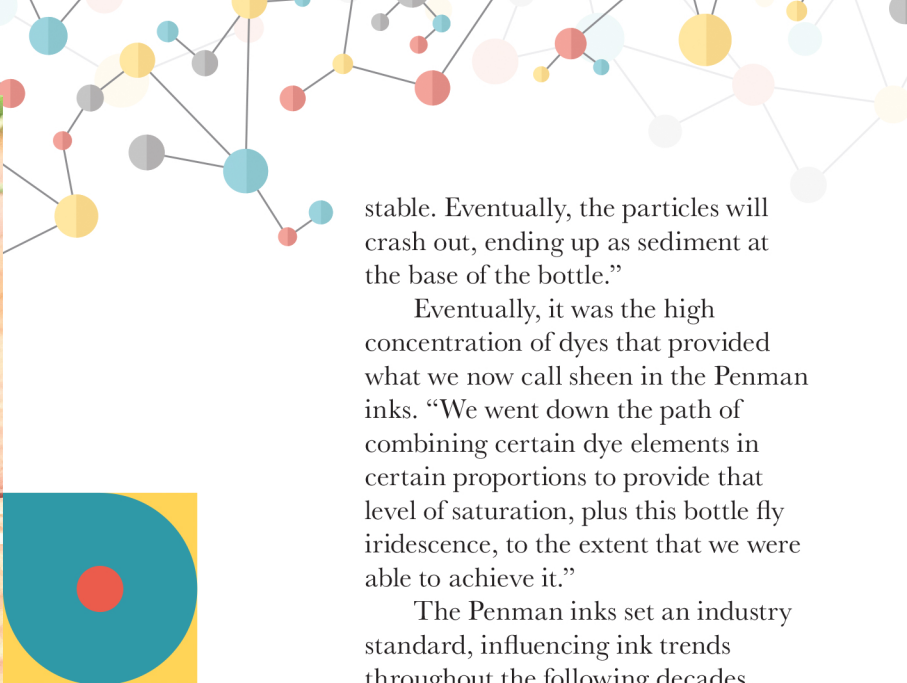
ended up putting this together, and it failed in testing. It became clear to me that it wasn’t an ink problem, it wasn’t a tip problem, it was a system problem.”

This was the ’90s, and Parker was going through a lot of changes, revamping its line of pens, discontinuing a lot of older models like the 75, and launching new ones like the Insignia along with relaunching the venerable Duofold line. This kind of rejiggering required all hands on deck, so while Leighton was the ink chemist at the time, he was still part of product development meetings alongside engineers, which is how he found himself in meetings regarding the Sonnet.

“On the Sonnet, I remember very clearly the meeting where we were coming up with names for a writer’s pen. It was an iconic design by Geoff Hollington with a very flexible nib, which added a little character to someone’s handwriting.”

Around the same time as the development of the Sonnet, the Penman Inks were being developed. “It was an interesting time, because more and more colors were coming into vogue. Richer colors tend to be higher in solids





content, which means you have to protect the ink using tricks of the trade, as these inks can dry out very quickly, particularly if the cap is left off. This is where I was—getting more into understanding how these pens function and how these pens interact with the chemistry of the ink.”

To develop Penman, the high-end ink line to complement the Duofold and new Sonnet pens, Leighton had a seemingly simple assignment: “We were to come up with a range of gemstone inks.” The details were a bit more complex: “the marketing team wanted an iridescent ink inspired by the sheen of the green bottle fly. There’s another tone that is present beyond the obvious one. The Ebony is a red black. The Emerald has got a blue tinge without it being turquoise. The Sapphire has a red component to it, almost purple.”

They were tasked with imbuing five colors with this multi-layered quality. “You have blue, black, and probably red in there,” says Leighton. “The other colors were up for grabs. Getting that look of iridescence was going to be a challenge.” Leighton’s first thought was to achieve this effect using what is today a popular trend in inks: shimmer. “I was looking at adding particles like mica to provide this sheen, this iridescence. There’s no way we could make those inks

stable. Eventually, the particles will crash out, ending up as sediment at the base of the bottle.”

Eventually, it was the high concentration of dyes that provided what we now call sheen in the Penman inks. “We went down the path of combining certain dye elements in certain proportions to provide that level of saturation, plus this bottle fly iridescence, to the extent that we were able to achieve it.”

The Penman inks set an industry standard, influencing ink trends throughout the following decades, and their unique sheen was not the only iconic element; the bottle design was also unique, due in part to the forward-thinking practice of working closely and reiteratively with the marketing team.

“I remember meeting with Lansdown Conquest in London, who designed the bottle for us, and seeing the very first machined solid block prototype. It was a very attractive bottle, but the first time we saw it, we said, ‘How on earth are you going to fill a fountain pen with that? The neck is too small!’ That ultimately led to the development of the neck insert.” The neck insert is seen today in bottles by Sailor, as well as in the Diamond inkwells made by TWSBI.

Despite thoughtful and lasting design, it was not all smooth sailing for the Penman inks. The initial Emerald proved to be too rich, leading to clogging and “nib crud,” and the ink had to be reformulated, Leighton says. “We were able to back off on the dye concentration significantly without impacting the color. That was a good move that happened shortly after launch.”

As evidenced by pen community online forums, the Penman ink line was dogged by issues of clogging, often cited as a reason why it was eventually dropped. To this, Leighton suggests use of a good pen. “These are relatively thick ink formulas. If

they don't work well in one pen but they do in another, that's not a problem with the ink. I would suggest, likely, a problem with the pen, as not all fountain pens are made equal. I suspect the engine of those pens [that are clogging] were being developed and tested with much lower saturation ink than the Penman ink."

This led me to ask Leighton what modern pens might be best used with the Penman inks. He suggests Lamy and Pelikan. Knowing which pens to pair with Penman ink might tempt one to rehydrate an old bottle, but Leighton warns against this: "I see people writing about this. You can't do it. The reason why you can't is that there is a unique blend of solvents and preservatives that go into these inks. If the water and other solvents evaporate, and all you do is add more water, you're not adding back those solvents, and you're diluting the preservative."

"The preservative stops the inks from going moldy, and the color can change as a consequence," he explains further. "The last thing you want to do is dilute an ink, unless you're diluting it with water plus the correct blend of solvents and preservatives. You might think you're solving the problem just because you've got the ink to flow a little better, but you've introduced a number of other potential issues, including feathering."

Leighton's tenure at Parker continued through acquisitions by Gillette and later Newell-Rubbermaid, lending him perspective about Penman inks' place in the history of pen and ink design. While working in Chicago for Newell-Rubbermaid, he led the research team behind the creation of the first metallic colored Sharpie. During this time, executives responsible for the Parker brand discontinued Penman. When I asked Leighton about this, he told me he thought this was motivated by the cost of production and distribution.

"The Penman range were expensive products to manufacture. The bottle was expensive, the Golden Touch Penman ballpen refill had a powder-coated black coating, and we had developed a rotating ratchet at the back end of the refill. The writing tips had a gold-colored coating on them. Also, the fountain pen ink dyes were quite saturated, and a combination of dyes were used to give it that iridescence. All of this adds up, and often these products are not sustainable in the long term."

This is not the sole reason why the Penman inks were discontinued, but it's pretty clear why Newell-Rubbermaid would be more invested in cheaper products like the Sharpie than a classic boutique ink, and this makes a lot more sense than vague rumors about clogging and retailers refusing to stock because of



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customer complaints. Dr. Leighton Davies-Smith isn't bitter about the company's decision.


"When Gillette first acquired Parker, I had been wondering, 'What am I going to do in my career? Am I going to be an ink chemist for life?' Gillette gave me the opportunity to move to the States for a temporary three-year assignment. Here it is 23 years later. There was growth potential as a technologist as part of a much larger organization, and I had opportunities to work with other brands like Paper Mate, Liquid Paper, and Waterman there."

More recently, he worked as an independent consultant for his own business, Scribe Technical Consulting: "For three years or so I was a technical consultant to the writing instrument industry. I spent a lot of time in India with component manufacturers in the pen world. Every January, for the past 20 years or so, I go to the Paper World Fair in Frankfurt, Germany, where I reconnect with old colleagues and friends and see what's new."

So, what is Leighton's pen of choice? "My everyday pen that I will go out of my way to buy—and buy a lot of—because I enjoy them so much, is the Uni-ball

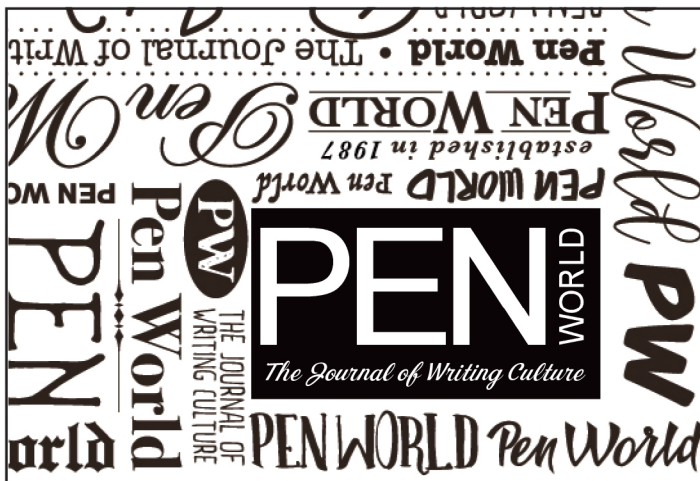
rollerball. The ink, the delivery system, and the writing tip were developed in-house with collaboration between teams. This internal capability delivers optimum performance. This reinforces my view that it's important to have an ink, a tip, and a delivery system that work harmoniously. Every single pen is of the same performance, start to finish, and consistent from box to box. In fact, I buy them by the box. For me, it works perfectly."

I went into this conversation expecting answers to the mystery of Penman. Unexpectedly, I also emerged with a deeper understanding of product development, ink delivery systems, and the business of pen development. Dr. Leighton Davies-Smith has many more stories about his time at Parker Newhaven in a quickly changing industry, and I look forward to sharing insights gleaned from future conversations. Also, Leighton is also exploring launching his own ink line, so look soon, hopefully, for inks made by the chemist behind Penman!

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