The Spinning Wheel Sleuth

A Newsletter About Spinning Wheels and Related Tools

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Dear fellow spinners and wheel enthusiasts,

Welcome to Issue #83. We begin our 21st year of publication by focusing on spinning wheels built in the 20th century. One is from the first part of the century in Australia, and the other is from the last quarter from New York State. We learn how to identify a decorator or non-functional spinning wheel, the dreaded SWSO.

Elizabeth Harvey in Australia has an upright wheel labeled "Strickland Silent Spinner." She discovered that it was designed by a diplomat, Sir Gerald Strickland, and built by a company in Sydney. She tells how it was used by the Australian Red Cross during World War I.

While traveling in Texas in September, I visited Yarnorama in Paige, TX. The owner, Susan Fricks, showed me her "American Traveler" spinning wheel. I was intrigued and photographed it. It was designed, patented, and manufactured by Doloria Chapin in New York State in the late 1970s. She was a well-known spinning teacher and was instrumental in starting several spinning guilds. I describe the interesting features of this wheel, Doloria's publications, and her place in the spinning community of that time.

As a restorer of spinning wheels, Reed Needles has seen a fair number of SWSOs—Spinning Wheel–Shaped Objects. He explains how to recognize one so that you don't end up with a nonfunctional wheel that would be a costly mistake.

Once again Pat Bownas has updated our SWS index. The *Index for Issues #1 to #82* is available free in printed form or as a PDF. *Hand Looms, Supplements #11–#16* are still available, as is the CD *SWS, The First Ten Years*. Subscribers always get a discount.

Sincerely yours,

Florence Feldman-Wood

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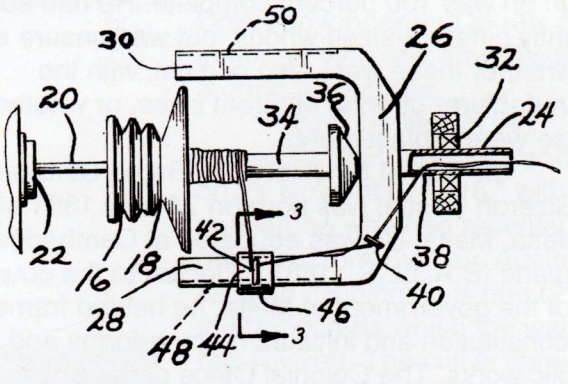
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Detail of Doloria Chapin's Yarn Guide
Patent #4,090,347, May 1978

The Strickland Silent Spinner

by Elizabeth Harvey

The Strickland Silent Spinner is a unique Australian spinning wheel. It was invented by a public figure, Sir Gerald Strickland, manufactured by a well-known Sydney business, Bebarfalds, and distributed by the Australian Red Cross Society to support the war effort during World War I.

Although the Strickland spinner is not "pretty," it was well made and functional. Sir Gerald referred to it as a machine rather than a spinning wheel. It was designed to spin directly from the unwashed fleece, without the need to card, and was considered to be much faster than traditional wheels as it incorporated the use of ball bearings. The mass-produced Strickland wheel weighs 22 lbs. [10 kg.], the wheel-post height is 28½" [72 cm.], the drive-wheel circumference is 11¾" [30 cm.], and it has a substantial rubber-covered treadle that is 14"x7¾" [35x20 cm.].



Strickland Silent Spinner

Respected spinner Owen Evans has had the experience of spinning on a complete Strickland wheel and describes it as follows: "It is a bobbin-led design, as used by the modern wheel-maker Louet, and the example I tried was a capable spinner. Due to the rather small whorl size, the take-up was a tad fiddly to adjust; however, once set, very small increments were required as the bobbin filled to compensate." Owen commented that he was certain the wheel he spun on was 100 percent complete. He had seen slightly different-sized whorls, but was unsure as to whether these were also original, with the manufacturer offering different sizes, or whether these were replacements.

Sir Gerald Strickland, 1st Baron Strickland of Sizergh Castle, was born on 24 May 1861 at Valletta, Malta. He was educated at Cambridge, England (B.A. LL.B., 1887). Elected to the council of the government of Malta, he helped frame its constitution and initiated many reforms and public works. The Colonial Office of the British Government appointed him governor of Tasmania (Australia) in 1904. He took up two further appointments, governor of Western Australia in 1909 and then, in 1913, governor of New South Wales [NSW]. He was described as "handsome, solidly built of middle height, a genial host, brilliant controversialist and could be tactless." He came into conflict with the NSW elected government, which ended his appointment in April 1917. He went on to further his political career in Britain and Malta. He died in 1940.[1]

He was interested in the wool industry, and both his wife and daughter were accomplished handspinners. He made the first Strickland wheel for his daughter, Mary. For health reasons he had to give up riding and decided to spend more time in his workshop. He describes making his "machine" from "scraps of iron, old gas piping, ball bearings and the rest."[2,3]

Spinning experienced a resurgence as part of the Red Cross Society war effort. His wife, Lady Edeline, was a great supporter of Red Cross Society events where hand spinning was demonstrated and women were encouraged to learn the new skill. His daughter Mary demonstrated tirelessly on her machine. One of these events was the Exhibition of Women's Work in Wartime held at the Sydney Town Hall [3] that opened on 6 September 1916 by the Girls' Realm Guild of Sydney. A contemporary newspaper article described the Strickland spinner as a "study in meccano."

The original spinner was again exhibited in the Great Industrial and Models Exhibition in the Railway Pavilion, Sydney, which opened on Monday, 15 January 1917.[4] A catalog of the exhibits compiled by G. L. Gardiner describes the event as showing "The Growth of a Nation." This exhibition promoted the engineering expertise as well as the creative skills of Australians. On page 17 of the catalog there is a reference as follows: "In the Large Hall in the Main Building of the

Institute, His Excellency Sir Gerald Strickland has kindly lent for Exhibition [a] Combination Lathe, Drilling Machine, and Planer, for metal work. One specially designed Spinning Machine for preparing worsted for Red Cross knitting work."

I have found another reference to the Strickland wheel being exhibited at the Patriotic Society in Melbourne in the *Freeman's Journal*, 8 March 1917 [5].

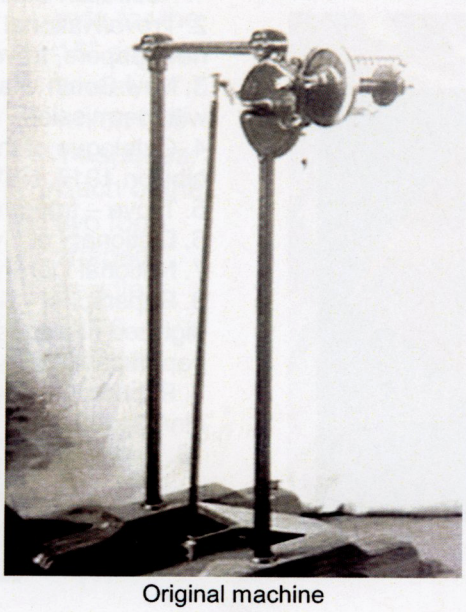

Sir Gerald Strickland

To replicate the original machine cost 12 pounds, which Sir Gerald considered too expensive if it was to be used widely in the war effort. He modified it and was able to reduce the price to 3 pounds. He also donated at least 10 Strickland Spinners to the Red Cross to distribute. Photos show the design changes that he made: replacing some of the metal parts with wood and adding a more-traditional drive wheel. Subsequent newspaper reports confirm that the Strickland wheel was still more efficient than the traditional wheels.

The redesigned Strickland Spinners were manufactured by Bebarfalds and Co. in Sydney.[6] Bebarfalds was primarily a furniture retailer. They were situated in a prestigious location, opposite the Sydney Town Hall. They became famous for their Bluebird sewing machines, which have elegant timber cabinets, manufactured in their own factory.

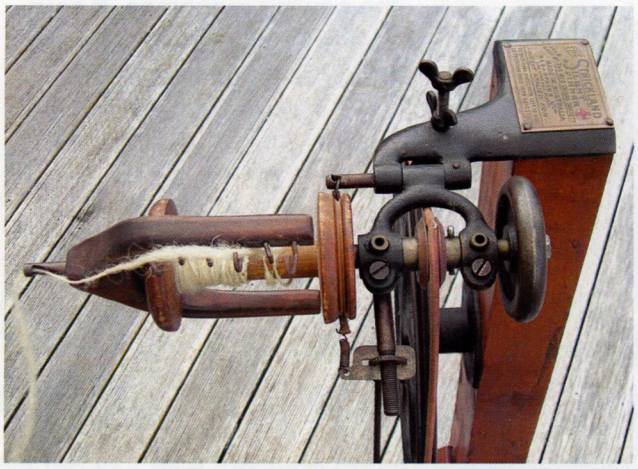
There are several similarities between the Strickland wheel and the sewing machines. The metal drive wheels used on the treadle-powered sewing machines look very similar in size and manufacture to the one on the Strickland wheel, although the design is different (from the photos I have seen). Another similarity is that the Strickland spinning wheel has a large metal label that is also common on the sewing machines.

Bebarfalds also had a sewing machine on display in the Great Industrial and Models exhibition. On page 4 of the catalog there is a description of the sewing machines. It says that Australian iron, steel, and solid Australian maple were used in over two thirds of the manufacture of the sewing machine, and the best case-hardened Swedish steel was used for the parts of the machine that could not be made in Australia, and this was made by the British War Office. Because both the spinning wheel and the sewing machine were being made during a time of war, it would seem most practical that they would have similarly manufactured parts.


Original machine

An article in the *Singleton Argus* newspaper (NSW) on 16 June 1917 describes how "Red Cross ladies of the metropolis have taken up the important work of wool spinning with excellent results. The ladies were fortunate in having an enthusiastic friend in Sir Gerald Strickland, the late State Governor, and thanks to his mechanical skill and inventive genius they now have at their command a machine specially devised by his Excellency, known as the Strickland Silent Spinner".[7] Instructional staff from the Red Cross taught women in the city and country areas to spin on more-traditional wheels as well as the Strickland. There is a description of the use of the wheel: "The processes are very interesting, the lady at the Strickland machine just taking the wool in the fleece and feeding it in a drawn out thread, which by light treadle work, is rapidly transformed into the finished article, ready for washing and dyeing." The women who knitted for the Red Cross no longer had to rely on imported yarn and saw this as a great advantage.

An interview in the *Auckland Star* (New Zealand) on 29 November 1916,[8] with a gentleman who had recently returned from Sydney, Australia, said "[S]pinning is one of the handcrafts which the war has revived. The cult is spreading far and wide." He had met Sir Gerald and his daughter at the Sydney Red Cross Depot



Detail of bobbin/flyer unit

and he was "given consent" for one wheel being sold to New Zealand. He had observed "a dozen or more machines" in action at the depot. He also said that the spinning revival had only started in February of that year, but 72 spinning wheels had been sold. It is unclear as to whether these were all Stricklands, as other spinning wheels were also being used.

Another New Zealand article in the *Poverty Bay Herald* on 9 August 1918 [9] describes a display held by the Poverty Bay Spinning Society of wheels—one of which was a Strickland, along with accessories and knitted soldiers' comforts. "The home-spun wool is much valued by men in the trenches, and socks knitted from it are said to minimise the danger of 'trench feet' and frostbite. It is certainly of greater strength than machine-spun wool, and as it is all donated to this society, a first-class wool is obtained free of cost."



The plaque

The plaque on the Strickland wheel reads that "a patent" has been applied for. A Provisional Patent No. 3859 was submitted in 1917 by Sir Gerald for a spinning wheel. So far, no record can be found of the complete specifications having been submitted. Sir Gerald and his family left Australia in late 1917. I found the following reference in the *Euroa Advertiser* on Friday, 3 May 1918: "Governor Strickland, had made a spinning wheel, an improvement on the present machines and presented the patent to the Red Cross Society."[10] I have not been able to verify this information from the Red Cross archives. The patent mystery continues.

Today we usually spin because we love to. I am reminded that in the past, many spun to earn their living or to clothe their families. The story of the Strickland Silent Spinner is a mix of many ingredients: a man who loved to invent, skilled workers who manufactured a reliable machine, the enthusiasm of women brought together for a cause, and the Australian and New Zealand people who took up the challenge to provide some home comfort to soldiers on the battlefields. I consider myself extremely fortunate to own a wheel with such an interesting story.

Author's note: Special thanks to Owen Evans and Mary Knox for their assistance, and to Mary for the photos. I would also like to acknowledge Mew Leng Mouy of the State Library of Victoria who has assisted in searching patent archives.

Notes and Resources

1. Australian Dictionary of Biography
2. Trove/National Library of Australia, digitized newspapers, trove.nla.gov.au/Sydney Morning Herald
3. New South Wales State Library – photo reproduced with permission.
4. Catalogue of the Great Industrial and Models Exhibition 1917, NSW State Library
5. Trove – trove.nla.gov.au/
6. Dictionary of Sydney
7. National Library of Australia
8. Paperspast - National Library of New Zealand, digitized newspapers - paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast
9. Paperspast - paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast
10. Trove – trove.nla.gov.au/