

**THE SEASON FOR LOVE:**  
*A COLLECTION OF CHOICE*  
**VALENTINES**



FROM THE JOHN JOHNSON COLLECTION  
OF PRINTED EPHEMERA

A display in the Bodleian Library 1-27 February 2010

## A SELECTION OF VALENTINES FROM THE JOHN JOHNSON COLLECTION OF PRINTED EPHEMERA

Although dating from the end of the eighteenth century, the printed valentine is essentially a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Victorian valentines took many forms, and the postman's knock was eagerly awaited on 14 February. In 1863 the Postmaster-General estimated in his annual report that 450,000 valentines had passed through the London Post Office alone.



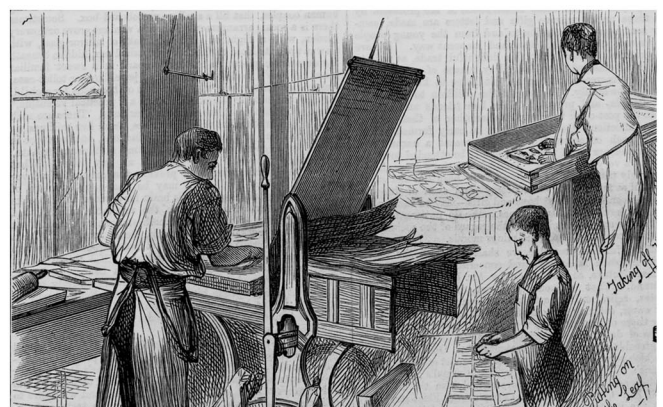
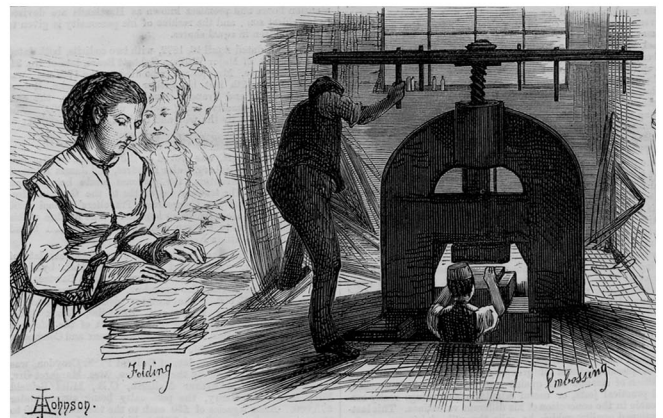
### CUPID'S MANUFACTORY: THE MAKING OF VALENTINES

Valentines could be made at home, possibly with the aid of a valentine-writer which offered tongue-tied lovers a choice of ready-written verses ranging from the comic to the love-struck [no. 35]. However, many were purchased from manufacturers who dedicated the entire year to their making. The most intricate of these 'dainty wares' passed through many hands in the production process [no. 3].

Beginning as artists' designs before being transferred to woodblocks, copperplates [no. 5] or lithographic stones for printing, valentines might have embossed borders added by die-stamping [no. 24], and gilding by applying gold and silver leaf or iridescent metallic powder onto varnish over the bas-relief [nos. 9, 12, 14–18, 23, 27, 28]. Delicate traceries of lace-paper were created by sanding away the embossing to leave a web of holes [nos. 8, 16, 17, 21, 24].

In the finishing department women sat at benches with pots of water-colour [no. 4], adding stencilled colouring before other women used glue and paper springs [nos. 10, 14, 18, 23] to ornament the valentines with everything from pressed and artificial flowers [nos. 18, 23], satin ribbons, gauze [no. 18], silks [no. 12] and scraps [nos. 9, 14–18, 22–24, 27, 28] to feathers [no. 24], mirrors, tinsel [nos. 2, 24], pearls and cut-paper flaps. Envelopes, often themselves highly embossed [no. 16], and boxes [no. 14] were needed to package and protect the increasingly three-dimensional valentine. Finally, the completed gift took its place in the factory shop or the stationer's window [no. 1], with each design recorded in the publisher's stock book [no. 6].

Larger firms, such as Rimmel's, employed up to 150 women to assemble these valentines. Reporting on the trade in 1864, Dickens visited the factory of Joseph Mansell and found the work to be 'of a healthy and cheerful kind... The girls work from eight o'clock in the morning till seven o'clock at night, with intervals for dinner and tea, and their wages range from five to fifteen shillings a week' (*All the Year Round*, February 1864).





## CUPID'S DREAM

Valentines were in their heyday from the 1840s to the 1870s. At the lower end of the market, priced at one or two pence, they had crudely coloured woodcuts and indifferent verse, printed on cheap paper [no. 25]. At the top end, elaborate valentines using the highest-quality materials sold for anything between a shilling and ten guineas. From a folded sheet with addresses both sentimental and postal on the verso, the valentine grew into an increasingly ornate confection with its own language of love, including a well-executed but rarely surprising imagery of courting couples, cupids, churches, hearts, Temples of Hymen, flowers, turtledoves, and butterflies. The accompanying verses were skilful, though equally predictable: “all ‘thine’ and ‘shine’ and ‘divine’ – and, of course, ‘valentine’ – ‘bliss’ and ‘kiss,’ and ‘beauty’ and ‘duty’” (*London Review*, February 1865).

Mechanical valentines used moving parts activated by strings or tabs to spring a surprise [nos. 9, 11], while other valentines were made into sachets scented with perfume [no. 17]. One of the principal manufacturers of perfumed valentines was Rimmel. ‘Flower-cage’ valentines (also known as beehive, birdcage, or cobweb valentines), usually dating from the 1820s to 1840s, were perhaps the most delicate of all. The central image was cut into an intricate spiral, lifted with a thread to reveal a hidden image [no. 8], motto, or mirror. Novelty valentines [nos. 13, 30–32] departed from the usual sentimental scraps. ‘To a bachelor with fondest love’ [no. 13] uses real buttons, needles and sewing thread to persuade the bachelor that he is in need of ‘just one item more’: ‘a loving wife’.

Late in the nineteenth century, as the fashion for valentines declined, they lost much of their inventiveness and were increasingly chromolithographed onto single cards, (often with fringing), although the Walter Crane card [no. 21] retains a lace-paper border. The pin-cushion heart [no. 26] is an enigma. Clearly a love token with its valentine frill, and mounted in a glazed case, it includes elements of patriotism and religious fervour. During the second Boer War (1899–1902), disabled soldiers are known to have produced similar pin-cushions as a means of rehabilitation.

## COMIC OR BLACK-HEARTED VALENTINES

The valentine trade also harboured a sharper side. Popular from the early to mid-nineteenth century, comic valentines were drawn in great numbers by artists such as Robert Cruikshank and ‘Crowquill’ (really Charles and Alfred Forrester).



Generally offering an unflattering portrait of the recipient, they overflowed with saucy satires, mischievous jokes, and ugly caricatures of old maids and bachelors [nos. 36, 37], and animal-faced lovers. The cruellest of these were condemned in *The London Review* of 1865 as:

‘scandalous productions, vilely drawn, wretchedly engraved, and hastily dabbed over with staring colours... an outlet for every kind of spiteful innuendo, for every malicious sneer, for every envious scoff’.

To pile injury on insult, before the advent of the first pre-paid postage in 1840 it was the recipient rather than the sender who paid for delivery.

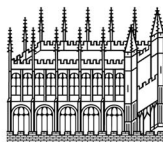
## GAMES OF LOVE

More light-hearted love-tokens tapped into the nineteenth-century passion for parlour games and forfeits. Spoof bank-notes [no. 32], usually issued by the 'Bank of Hymen' or Cupid, promise 'to give on demand the love of the suppliant' or to pay kisses into the bearer's account, whilst novelties such as the *Curious Hieroglyphick Valentine* [nos. 30, 31] demand that the recipient solve a rebus, or word puzzle.

One home-made game, *The magic bouquet* [no. 34], invites players to divine 'who rules your heart' by lifting moveable tabs positioned over a picture of a bouquet of flowers. Similarly, the *Map of Matrimony* [no. 33] charts a fantastical landscape of love. Would-be lovers must navigate a course from the Land of Spinsters (capital Tea Pot Town) and the Country of Single Men to reach the Land of Kindnesses, the River of Kisses and Engagement Bay. The ultimate prize was, of course, marriage, as shown at the pinnacle of the ladder of matrimony [no. 7] (although it descends into separation on the other side). *The New Game of Elopement, or A Trip to Gretna Green* [no. 29] led players on a desperate sprint to the altar, so often depicted on the valentine.



Curious Hieroglyphick Valentine  
(Solution below)



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Fair is the morning the dove leaves its nest  
And sings a salute to the crown  
The sun in full splendour embroiders the east  
And brightens the dew on the ground  
'Tis Valentine's day, and my love I address  
This letter can boast of a flame  
So pure and so true, I want words to express  
But I ask you to give it a name,  
And while my dear love on this letter you gaze  
Heave a sigh for a heart that is true,  
And believe that it such warm affection conveys  
As exists for no other but you.