

The history of *Derwent Pencils*



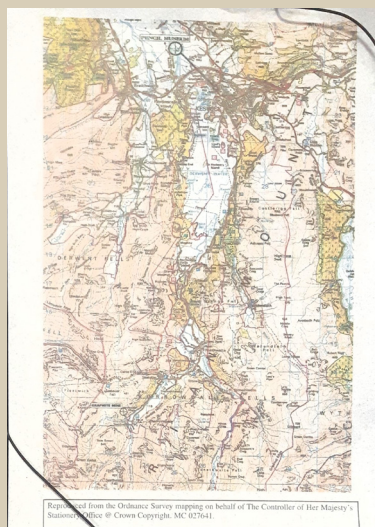
By John Maxwell

Derwent pencils have been made on the same site in Keswick, England, for over 75 years and the Factory itself has been in existence since 1832. But how did pencil making come about? And who discovered graphite?

The story began in 1500. Legend says there was a stormy night in the wild and beautiful Seathwaite Valley Near Keswick, in the heart of the English Lake District (Cumbria, England).

When Shepherds ventured out the next morning, anxious about their sheep, they discovered huge trees had been blown down, exposing large masses of black material under their roots. It looked like coal, but it didn't burn. However the shepherds soon realised it was an excellent medium for marking sheep

The material was, in fact, graphite. Cumberland graphite was the only form of usable graphite in the world because it was solid rather than dust. Graphite is one of the two forms of natural occurring pure carbon, the other being diamond.



Cumberland graphite became highly sought after, and the graphite mine was taken over by the government. Graphite became valuable during the reign of *Elizabeth I*. It was primarily carved into moulds for cannon balls, but it also had rare medicinal properties. The material was so valuable that it was transported from Keswick to London by armed stage coach.

The graphite pencil also became valuable during the second World War as a way to transport hidden documents.

Messages and documents, essential to certain activities conducted behind enemy lines, were concealed in everyday objects such as tins of shoe polish, bars of soap and inside the hollowed out heels of shoes for example.

One need was to provide instructions to help escaped British Prisoners of War evade recapture and allow them to find a route back home through Germany. To that end, a special set of pencils was designed by war-time "boffins," each of which concealed a map of Germany, and a miniature brass cased magnetic compass.

In the evenings, after factory workers had gone home, selected Department Managers carefully drilled the end out of about five inches of the pencil. They inserted a tightly rolled up map of Germany, placed a ferrule on the end, inserted the small compass into it and finally glued an eraser into the end.

The result was a normal looking, rubber-tipped pencil that played a significant role in WWII -- and soon became a well-used tool by artists worldwide.

John Maxwell owned and operated Maxwell's Artists Materials (located in Vanouever, then Langley) until 2005. Maxwell's Artists Materials began as a family run business established in 1949 by Alf Maxwell in Vancouver.

WWII Derwent Pencil shown with hidden compass, and the map hidden inside the pencil. From the archives of Maxwell's Artists Materials.