

Today the sewing machine is a firmly established piece of equipment both in the work place and the home. Traditionally women were expected to clothe themselves and their family and provide all the household textiles. If they were unable to employ a professional tailor or seamstress, then they stitched everything themselves - by hand. No wonder then when the first practical and affordable sewing machines appeared on the market women took to them almost immediately. Sewing machines were truly time and labour saving.

The early inventors had not intend their machines be used in the home, but in the clothing industries. Tailors, however, were generally slow to take up the idea of the sewing machine and some were very much against it.

The first sewing machine was invented by Thomas Saint in 1790, a London cabinet maker, but it was Barthélemy Thimonnier, a French tailor, who produced the first successful sewing machine. By 1840 he had a workshop with twenty of his machine producing uniforms for the French army. In fact they were deemed so successful that his machines were broken up by hand-workers who saw them as a threat to their livelihood.



The sewing machine went through further developments in both Europe and America during the first half of the 19th century. By the 1850s the basic elements of the modern sewing machine, including the horizontal table and the presser foot, had been introduced. There were many companies involved in the development of the sewing machine and one of the most innovative was Willcox & Gibbs.

In 1855 James Gibbs, a farmer from Virginia, saw a woodcut illustration in a newspaper of a sewing machine. He was curious to know how it worked as he had no knowledge of the mechanism that existed below the table as it was not shown. He did not know that there was another thread underneath, and so came up with

his own design for a rotating hook which would take up the thread from the needle and manipulate it into a chain-stitch. He did not take his idea further at first, but after seeing a Singer machine the following year, and thinking it to be complicated, heavy and expensive, he made a model of his own design.



He patented it in 1857 and in partnership with Charles Willcox, a hardware wholesaler, began manufacturing. Willcox knew the market and saw that customers wanted a robust product that required little maintenance. It had to be lighter than other available machines and available at a competitive price. Singer had introduced part exchange and hire purchase deals to sell his machines, but they were still expensive. Willcox and Gibbs in partnership with Brown & Sharp, a toolmaking business in Rhode Island, developed standardised manufacturing processes. As a result the price of a Willcox and Gibbs machine was a third of that of a Singer. The machine was an instant success.

Willcox & Gibbs soon opened an office in London and their machines cost between £8 and £15. As the business grew branch offices opened up around the country including one in Leeds and most towns had a 'certified agent'.

Not a household name, unlike some of their rivals, Willcox & Gibbs were a ground breaking and very successful company. They continued to produce their chain-stitch machine until 1948 and they also made industrial sewing machines. The firm finally closed down in 1973.