

Oldham, John

by Paul Rouse

Oldham, John (1779–1840), inventor and miniature painter, was born in Dublin; nothing more is known of his background. He was apprenticed at an early age to be an engraver but subsequently worked as a miniature painter. He exhibited five miniatures at an Exhibition in Parliament House, Dublin, in 1801 and was then employed as an engraver in Duffy's Calico Printing Works in Ballsbridge. While living at 29 Westland Row he invented the Eidograph machine, which he claimed could reproduce miniature likenesses with unerring accuracy. Driven by this spirit of invention, he developed a deep interest in mechanics and engineering, and invented a numbering machine. In 1809 he attempted to sell the machine to the Bank of Newry to number their banknotes, but they declined the offer. In 1812, however, the machine was adopted by the Bank of Ireland and he was subsequently appointed engineer and chief engraver of that bank. Among his many initiatives, he introduced a system for the heating of buildings. In 1837 he went to work for the Bank of England, and is credited with the introduction of a wide range of technical improvements in the machinery for printing and numbering banknotes, as well as another heating system.

Throughout his life he embarked on ambitious maritime schemes. In 1817 he obtained a patent for propelling ships using paddles worked by a steam engine, based on the imitation of the movement of a paddle operated by hand. By 1820 he had improved on this design, placing the paddles on a shaft across the ship, revolving them as they were feathered by gearing. This idea was developed still further in an 1827 patent, which saw the construction of a feathering paddle-wheel. Although these inventions were somewhat rudimentary, the 1820 model was sufficiently effective to be used in the *Aaron Manby*, the first sea-going iron ship ever constructed.

Oldham died 14 February 1840 in London at his home in Montagu St., Russell Square. No details are known of his marriage, but it is claimed he left a family of seventeen children, one of whom was his eldest son, Thomas Oldham (1801–51), who succeeded his father in the Bank of England. He was elected as an associate of the Institution of Civil Engineers in 1841, and in the following year he read a paper to that body entitled 'On the introduction of letterpress printing for numbering and dating the notes of the Bank of England'.

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*Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*; Strickland, ii, 193–5; *DNB*; Crone

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