

# TONBRIDGE WARE:

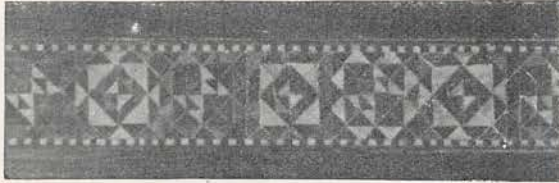
## ITS HISTORY AND MANUFACTURE.

BY FREDERICK A. A. TALBOT.



MOSAIC work, in a variety of forms, has always possessed an inexplicable and fascinating charm. Although its genesis is buried in the depths of obscurity, yet for hundreds of years it has been one of the most favoured mediums of decoration. In the

woodwork, known in the vernacular as Tonbridge ware—a curious name, suggestive of pottery—consists of views, flowers, borders, etc., chequered in all their natural colours, with minute pieces of variously-coloured woods about a twentieth of an inch square. So accurately are these pieces of wood cut, even at these diminutive dimensions, and so neatly and closely are they glued together, that they resemble one solid piece of wood with the design painted upon it, although, curiously enough, painted drawings upon white wood first suggested and subsequently changed into the present industry.

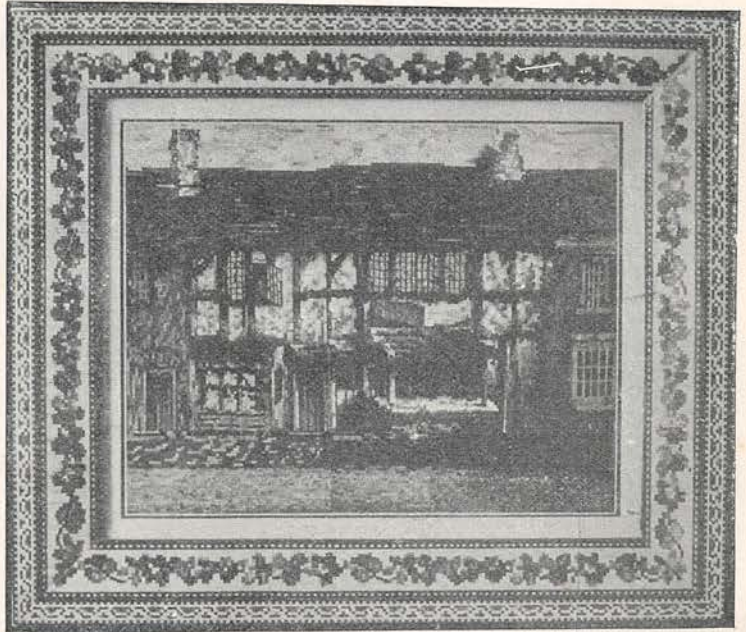


AN EARLY PIECE OF TONBRIDGE WARE.

Roman era men were fond of tessellating floors into some grotesque or picturesque pattern with little pieces of stone and glass. Portions of these pavements have been excavated from such places as Pompeii, while in the British Museum are fragments that have been unearthed even in London itself. This primitive *tessera* afterwards developed into the Florentine inlaid marble work, which has long been admired for its exquisite beauty. In this product the parquetry effect is obtained by inlaying pieces of marble of every imaginable hue, further embellished with such valuable and beautiful materials as onyx, mother-of-pearl, lapis lazuli, topaz, and amethyst.

The quaint inlaid woodwork which forms the staple industry of Tunbridge Wells is a modern example of this variety of art. This inlaid

There is considerable diversity of opinion as to when this art was first practised, but there are conclusive proofs that as far back as 1685 pieces of white wood, such as the holly and sycamore, with designs painted upon them in thin, narrow lines, similar to our present stencilling, were in vogue. The inlaying, however, was first attempted in 1720 by a



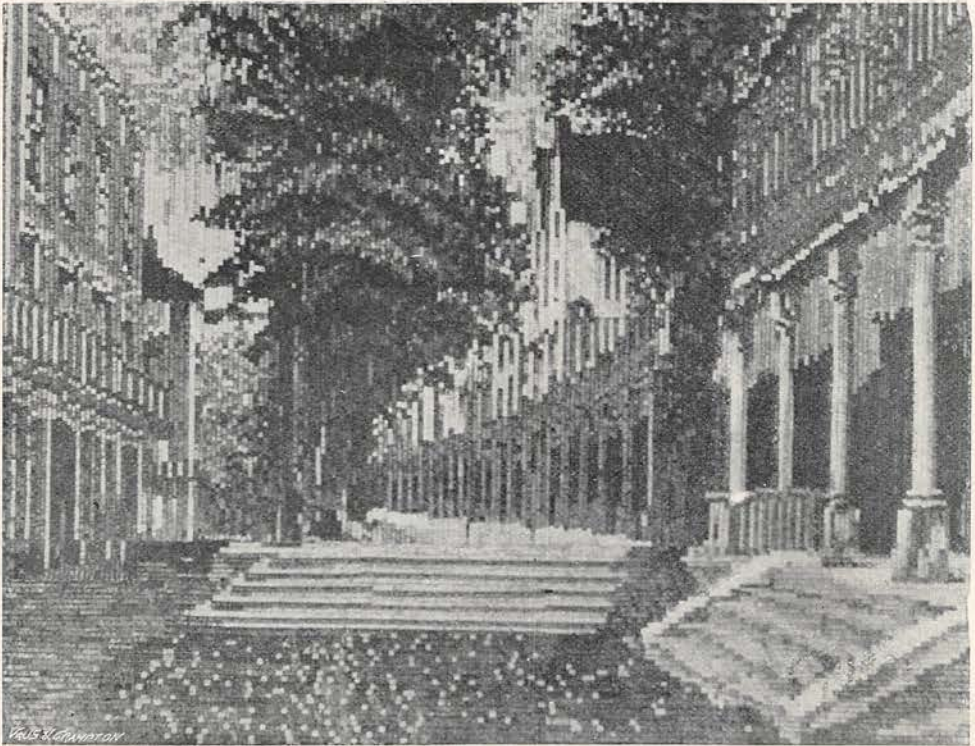
SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE, EXECUTED IN TONBRIDGE WARE.

man named Burrows. His work, although immaturely executed under exceptionally adverse circumstances, as the tools at his command were of primitive construction, was yet creditable. His mosaics consisted entirely of half-diamonds, diamonds, half-squares, squares, and stars in white and dark woods, as in our first illustration.

The most salient characteristic of this unique craft is the accuracy with which the colours of the original subject are reproduced upon the tessellated block, and this feature is all the more remarkable when it is remem-

green oak, known as "limb wood." This latter is remarkable for an extraordinary freak of nature. The smaller boughs of the oak trees in the forests, through wind and other natural agencies, become detached, fall to the ground, and decay. A minute fungus then grows upon it, and spreads its mycelium through the decayed wood, transforming it to a brilliant emerald green, and also imparting fresh strength to the cankered wood.

This wood, being found only in small quantities, has to be carefully collected,



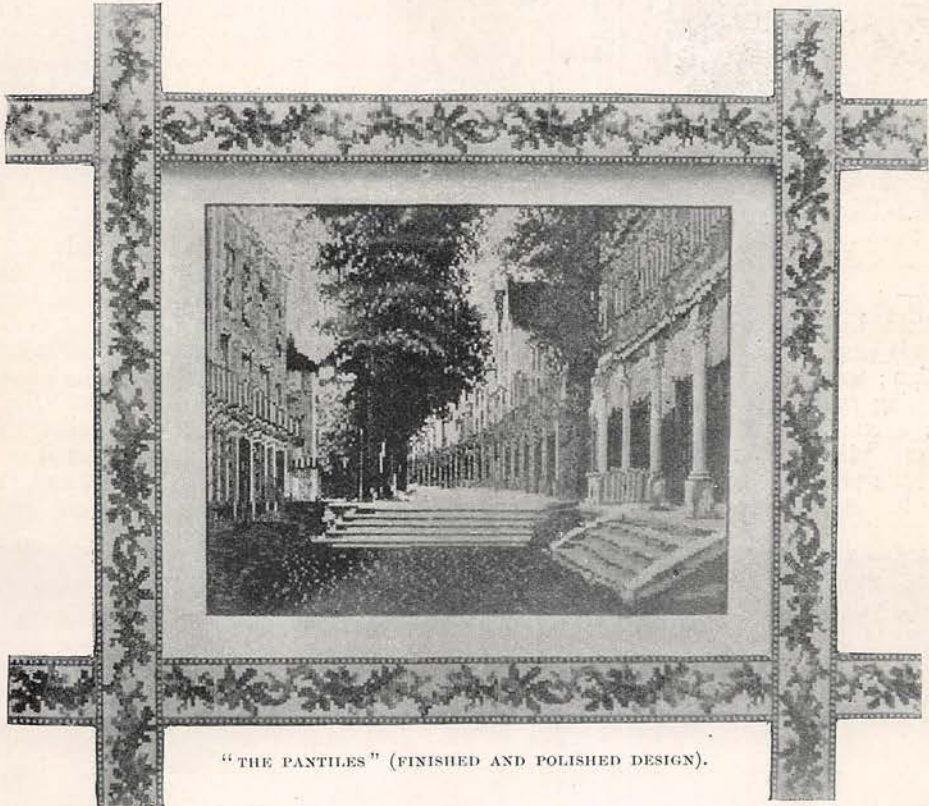
"THE PANTILES" (FIRST STAGE OF THE DESIGN).

bered that not one of these colours is obtained by staining the wood in some drastic dye of the required hue, but that the colour is natural to the particular wood itself. The range of colours is very extensive, comprising about 140. Thus black is obtained by using ebony or bog oak, both of which possess a deep, rich sable colour when polished; white with holly, sycamore, or chestnut; red by either bar-wood, which is of a deep orange colour, orange-wood, which is much lighter in hue, or red ebony; a brilliant lemon yellow with barberry; green by green ebony, which is very dark in colour, and a species of native

and is consequently highly prized, and fluctuates in value according to its grain, colour, and quality. The other principal woods employed are American birch, mahogany, fustic, walnut (English and American), plum tree, tulip (with its beautiful fruit red grain), cocus, snake-wood (so called from its being mottled like a snake), nutmeg, rosewood, mulberry, laburnum, box, peach, acacia, maple, and Hungarian ash, with its charming silky lustre and *moiré* grain. In short, no wood is too insignificant for utilisation in the manufacture of Tonbridge ware, so long as it does not contain too great a

quantity of sap, although a remedy is found in the case of one or two necessitous woods, such as the holly, to remove this *eau de vie*, by boiling it for several hours, which also performs the dual office of bleaching it considerably. Even the woods of the broom and furze are freely used. Chicanery is only resorted to in order to obtain one colour. Up to the present, no tree has been discovered the hue of whose wood is grey, and to remedy this deficiency birdseye maple and Hungarian ash are steeped for several weeks in the indigenous chalybeate waters, which

When it is proposed to inlay a certain view, border, or collocation of flowers in wood, a coloured design is first of all prepared by an artist upon a piece of paper divided into squares of about the eighth of an inch in measurement. When finished, this design closely resembles a piece of kindergarten or Berlin wool work. A drawing in this manner may cost anything, from sixpence to as many pounds, according to its size and nature. Of course, in this painting, the design has a painful squareness about it, as all the delicate natural contours of leaves,



"THE PANTRIES" (FINISHED AND POLISHED DESIGN).

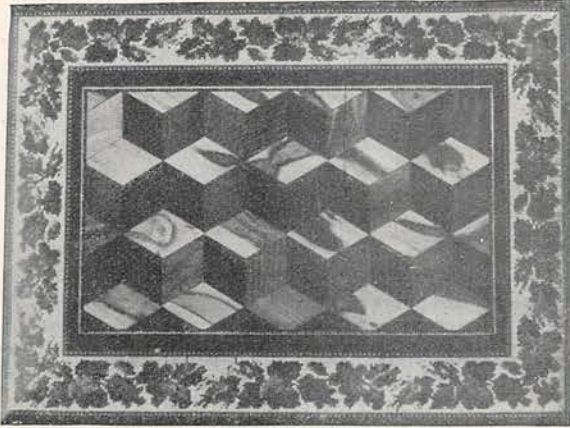
converts the natural yellowish whiteness of the woods into a soft steel grey. After all, this again is nature herself, for it is the chemicals in the mineral water that effect the transformation.

The multi-coloured woods arrive at the factory in long thin planks, about a quarter of an inch in thickness, and in thick logs. These have all to be reduced by circular saws into little thin slips, three and a half inches long, about one inch broad, and varying from a twentieth to a twelfth of an inch in thickness.

for instance, are represented by straight lines, either horizontal or vertical.

The design completed, the workman proceeds to set it up in wood. This entails great labour and care, for, in addition to being a skilled mechanic, an artistic faculty is absolutely essential in the judicious selection and composition of the different coloured woods to obtain a realistic effect. On all sides of him, within arm's length, are arrayed little piles of the narrow slips of wood—which, by the way, have to be well seasoned before they can be used—of all

shades and colours. His *modus operandi* is to commence at the bottom left-hand corner, take the first set of squares, and work across the drawing in a vertical direction. Suppose, for instance, he has to mosaic a

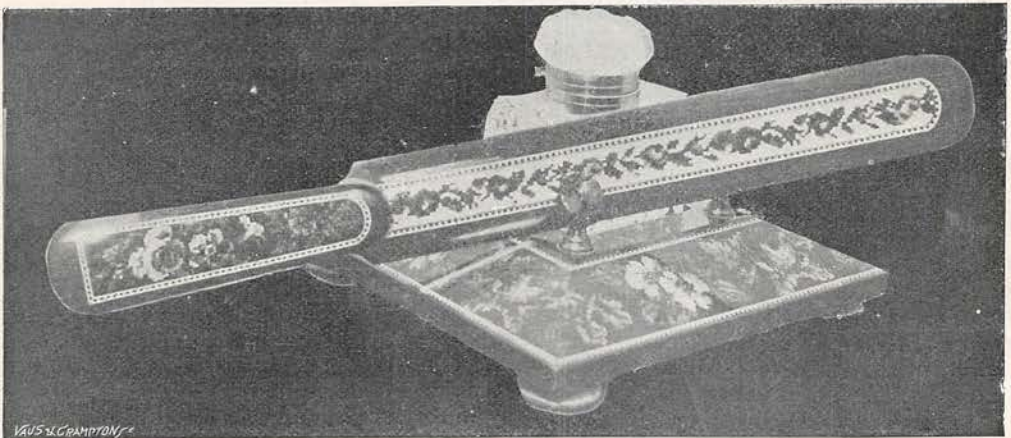


WORK-BOX COVER IN TONBRIDGE WARE.

bouquet of flowers. He refers to the bottom left-hand corner square and finds that it forms part of the groundwork of the design; that is to say, no portion of the drawing encroaches upon that space. As the groundwork is invariably white, he selects a slip of white wood from his plethora of little piles and lays it flat down upon his bench. Then he proceeds to the next square

the next square above, and so on, until he has worked his way right across the design, taking each square one by one and superposing their corresponding coloured slips of wood, in their order of sequence, in a little pile by his side. He then glues and presses these slips tightly together, and thus obtains a little block, three and a half inches long, one inch wide, and two or three inches in thickness, composed of thin little strips of variegated woods. He annotates this "number one" and proceeds to set up the second line of squares upon the drawing in the same manner, which he also afterwards glues up and consecutively numbers; and so on, until he has finished the design. If the drawing is a very large one, he may have as many as two hundred of these blocks of glued strips of wood. A thin veneer, about the twentieth of an inch thick, is now longitudinally cut from block "number one."

As he has now cut the reverse way of the wood, this veneer consists of a number of little frail sticks, three and a half inches in length and about a twentieth of an inch square, firmly held together by the glue. He lays this upon his bench, cuts a similar veneer from the second block, and glues it to the veneer cut from the first block, and so on with all the blocks, alternately cutting



AN INKSTAND AND PAPER-KNIFE IN TONBRIDGE WARE.

above. This occupies a portion of the design—the end of the petal of a leaf. This is green, and he therefore selects a piece of wood of the correct greenish shade, and lays this slip upon the former slip and proceeds to

veneers and gluing them to the preceding ones. These are now subject to great pressure in an iron press, to drive out all the superfluous glue, and to weld the frail, thin, pieces of wood firmly and inseparably

together. He has now obtained an exact and complete facsimile, square for square, of the drawing, in a solid block of wood three and a half inches in thickness. When thoroughly dry, veneers are again longitudinally cut with a circular saw from this block, and each veneer is a correct replica of the pattern. Out of a block three and a half inches in thickness it is possible to obtain as many as thirty veneers.

The illustration on page 370 conveys a graphic representation of the block when it reaches this stage. It is a view of "The Pantiles," but to the uninitiated it appears to be an indistinguishable conglomeration of a number of small blocks of wood, and presents a blurred and fuzzy appearance, very similar to a photograph badly out of focus. The next illustration is the same view after it has been polished. This particular piece of work only measures six inches in length and four and a half inches in breadth, yet there are no less than 32,600 pieces of wood, extending over one hundred different colours, involved in its composition. As heliochromic photography is not yet *un fait accompli*, it is impossible for us to do full justice to the work.

When the veneers of the complete design are obtained, they form the outside decoration of a variety of articles. Thus "Shakespeare's House" appears upon the lid of a workbox, "The Pantiles" upon a writing-desk, the bouquet of roses upon a handkerchief-box, and so on, according to the articles to which they are best adapted. After they have been planed and smoothed by sand-paper a high glaze is imparted to the work with two or three coats of varnish, followed by a good polish.

The cubical appearance of the inlaying in the next illustration is peculiarly realistic and beautiful. Here diamond-shaped pieces of wood are inlaid; but by arranging all the light-coloured pieces of wood in one direction, the dark-coloured pieces in another, and the half-toned pieces in yet a third, the peculiar veracious effect is obtained. The veining in some of the lighter-coloured portions is particularly beautiful. This is obtained by cutting the medullary rays of the wood on the "splay," as it is called, or on the transverse—that is, neither vertically nor horizontally, and the more acute the angle towards the perpendicular the more elongated become the circles.

