

Messrs. S. R. Stewart & Company,
Comb Manufacturers,
The Aberdeen Comb Works.

EXTRACT FROM "ABERDEEN ILLUSTRATED 1893."

Messrs. S. R. Stewart and Company have probably done more in spreading the name of the town of their adoption throughout the world than any other firm. The establishment is by no means of mushroom growth. It has taken seventy years to develop to its present position. Commencing about 1820, when the industry of comb making had just received an impetus by the invention of special machinery - the business has worked its way to the very front rank, and is now the largest of its kind in the world, providing constant employment for nearly 1,000 hands. Combs have been used by all peoples during every age for dressing the hair; and in mediaeval times very elaborately ornamented combs were used as head ornaments. Precious metal was frequently used in the form of combs for hair fastening, an allusion to this practice being found in the ancient Scottish ballad of Sir Patrick Spens:-

"O, lang, lang may their ladyes sit
Wi' their gowd kames in their hair."

Among the many curious customs of very early times, of which we have proof, was that of burying with the deceased various articles which had been used during life, and of these, objects of the toilet were interred more frequently than any other, ivory and boxwood combs having been found in early Christian tombs. Combs are now made of horn, tortoiseshell, ivory, wood, bone, metal, india-rubber, and of a composition known as xylonite. Horn is the chief comb-making material, and some idea of the extent of the industry at the Aberdeen Comb Works may be gathered from the fact that about 100,000 horns are used every week, and that of combs of all kinds nearly twenty millions are made annually. The processes of manufacture are full of interest, the necessary machinery being of a very elaborate kind. In dealing with horn we may say briefly that the horns are cut into rectangular pieces in a manner which involves the least possible loss. These segments are damped and heated till they become soft when they are opened out and pressed quite flat. Squaring, smoothing and trimming, are the processes next gone through preparatory to the actual tooth-cutting. This is done by a small circular saw, to which the plates are automatically applied, the horn moving the space of a tooth after each cut. Although saw cutting is the only process available in the manufacture of several kinds of combs "twinning" or parting is adopted, wherever practicable, this effecting a great saving of material and time. After being cut, the combs are pointed, secured and polished, these three processes alone requiring an enormous amount of labour; sand, cotton, cloth and druggot being largely employed in the process. A tour through Messrs. Stewart's premises convinces one at once of the immensity of their undertaking. There are to be seen very powerful steam-engines - one of 300 h.p., and three smaller ones - and these driven by four large boilers, are in constant operation in driving the powerful yet delicate machinery with which every department is fitted. The firm have always adopted the newest kinds of apparatus in their work, and to this fact they largely owe their continued pre-eminence in their particular line. The premises occupy upwards of three acres of ground, and are built in the form of three sides of a square. From one end to the other, from the elegantly-appointed offices, to the packing and despatching rooms, they are replete with every convenience, and special care is taken that no single comb leaves the place until it has been thoroughly examined and certified as good. Our mention of the annual turnover is sufficient to convince anyone of the extent of the trade done. Both at home and abroad Messrs. Stewart and Company carry on an enormous trade, and it is a significant fact that wherever they exhibited goods they have been awarded chief honours. In London 1862, Vienna 1873, Paris 1878, Sidney 1879, Melbourne 1880, Adelaide 1881, Amsterdam 1883, Antwerp 1885, Edinburgh 1886, and Paris 1889, and they were awarded the only medals in the trade, and the most recent success has been at Chicago 1893, where they carried off the principal honours for their various manufactures.

It will be seen from this list that the trade of the Aberdeen Comb Works affects every part of the Globe, and it is no small matter for Messrs. Stewart and Company to say that their trade and colossal connection has been built up entirely by their own indomitable perseverance, their continued energy and enterprise in every branch of the industry. The present senior partner of the firm is Mr. David Stewart, at present Lord Provost of Aberdeen, and well known as the laird of Banchory (a most picturesque estate on the south bank of the Dee, with an annual rental of some £4,000). The senior partner is also a member of the Horners Company of London, and that Company did him the honour of electing him one of the judges of their exhibition held at Mansion House, London, in 1882, the firm on that account generously abstaining from competing for prizes, although it is needless to say, they had one of the finest exhibits there. The firm have branches in London at 126, Queen Victoria Street, and in Birmingham at 14 Carr's Lane. Besides the manufacture of combs, the firm grind their waste product into their patent "Keromton," a fine dry powder used by all the first-class manure manufacturers. They also despatch about 300 tons of horn points to the makers of buttons and pipe mouthpieces, and to the cutlers in Sheffield, France and Germany.
