

AN OPEN AND SHUT CASE

Relics of another world, calling-card cases are now highly collectable objects. JEREMY MUSSON inspects one man's magnificent collection and recalls the place of these cases in the painfully precise milieu of 19th-century society.

IN the age of the e-mail, the world wide web and the text message, it is difficult to conjure up the era of the calling card. The very idea of visiting a house merely to leave a card announce your passing presence to a received social equal seems extraordinary. From the early 19th century to the early 20th century it was an almost daily activity for women of a certain class—and for men. Today's ubiquitous business card is far removed from its collateral ancestor. The personal calling card, in all but a few elegant instances, came to an end with the rise of the telephone and the motor car, extending the geographical range of social activity of all classes.

The social upheavals that followed the First World War inevitably brushed away the more complex minor social customs developed over the previous century of comparative peace. Such coveted today, and increasingly rare, are the small rectangular boxes or cases made to transport these cards, created in a large number of different materials. One of the best collections of such cases in private hands has been assembled by Richard Compton Miller.

Mr Compton Miller is a social commentator and diarist, a former editor of the Barn Hickey column of the *Daily Express* and author of *Who's Really Who?* A fascination for the ephemera of past social life is almost a natural corollary to his professional journalistic career. Mr Compton Miller—although born in Brocket Hall, Hertfordshire, during the Second World War, then an evacuee maternity home in the parish of his vicar grandfather—is a thorough Londoner. He grew up in the

Inner Temple, where his father, Sir John Compton Miller, a judge, had residential chambers. His first collecting enthusiasm as a boy was for lead soldiers, and the collecting of Victorian calling card cases began in 1960, when he was left an unusually handsome mother-of-pearl example among the effects of his maternal grandmother (see box below). Mr Compton Miller observes: 'They were really just fashion accessories but I expect one could tell a lot about a character by the type of calling card-case their owners had in their pocket.'

The complexity of the etiquette surrounding the calling card became a subject of fascination for Mr Compton Miller. It is said to have begun in France and

became the fashion in England, and in the United States, in the early 19th century. Numerous accounts in memoirs and published guides to social etiquette make clear the rules. Noel Riley, in her collector's guide, *Visiting Card Cases* (1983), quotes an author of the 1830s: 'In the country, on a stranger taking possession of a house or estate, it is customary for such of the surrounding gentry who may desire his intimacy to call or leave their card. Such visits will of course be returned, if you are desirous of their connexion; if not courtesy demands a return card.'

Card-leaving was also important in the town. In an account of social life in the early part of the 20th century (published in the Grange Park Opera programme last year), the Hon Aurea Baring recalled that while in London during the season the afternoon was for visiting. 'On arriving at the door, the footman rang and enquired if the lady was in. If she was, Mummy went in to see her. If the answer was no, she gave the footman one of her calling cards and two of Pups [her father]. One corner of the cards was always turned up to show one had called in person. After lunch a footman in knee breeches and with powdered hair always sat in the hall in a high-backed chair so there was no delay in the door being opened.'

In the US, the custom was also followed, although with different coded signals. A note in *Harper's Bazaar* (1868) stated: 'One corner of the card is turned down to denote the object of the visit. In different cities a different signification is attached



THE START OF A COLLECTION

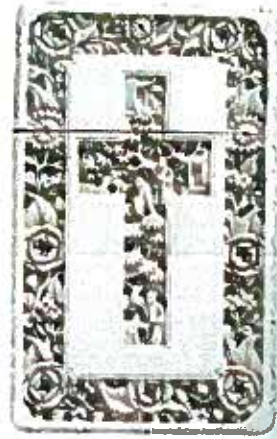
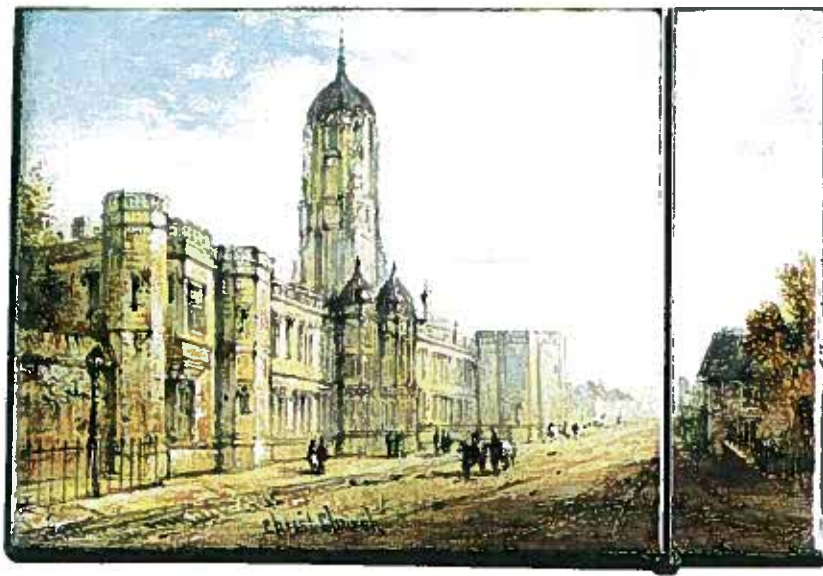
As is true of many great collections, Mr Compton Miller's fascination with calling-card cases was sparked by the bequest of a particularly fine family heirloom. His grandmother, Ellen Baird-Smith, left him a beautifully executed

example (right) which is remarkable for its use of large pieces of mother-of-pearl. This material is hard to work, and the craftsmanship required to make cases from it is demonstrated in other pieces in the collection. One intricately carved case (above) is thought to depict Joan of Arc.

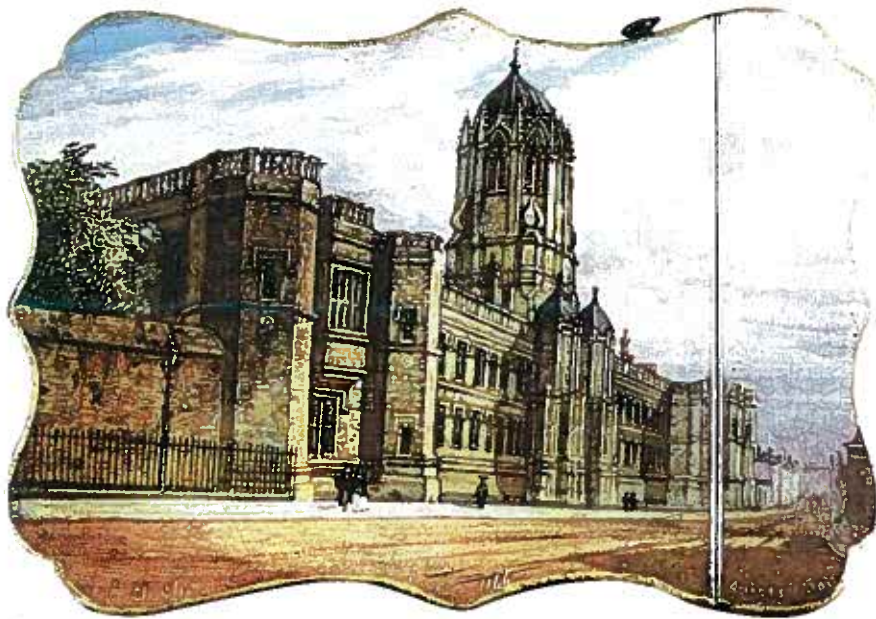




rose from left) 1—an ivory case with Oriental decoration set with a silver medal in the middle; a Mauchline-ware case depicting



2—Ivory cases such as this were often used as confirmation gifts, or, perhaps, to hold cards.



3—The romance of Scotland is evoked by this wooden case with a Tartan design.



to these broken cards. We give the cards to the members of New York society. On the left-hand corner the word *Visité* is engraved on the reverse side. This corner is turned over, displaying the word on the front of the card, to signify that an ordinary call is made. The right hand corner is *Felicitation*, used when making a visit of congratulation on some happy event such as a marriage or the birth of a child. On the left lower corner is *Congé*, or Goodbye. The remaining corner is marked *Condolence*.

The diminutive cases (usually rectangular and opened at the top) made to hold these cards in the pocket or hand were usually of silver, leather or ivory. As the 19th century progressed this little accessory came to be constructed from a number of decorative materials. Equally early in the century they tended to be relatively plain in decoration perhaps with a small plate for a name, initials or a crest, but later in the century they became demonstrably more elaborate, mirrored

4—Three views of Christ Church, Oxford, appear on these papier mâché cases. Hand-painted cases depicting scenes from famous towns and cities were popular souvenirs for visitors. They were probably made for Spicers of Oxford.



FOTOMAS

A late-19th-century cartoon highlighting the perils associated with the sometimes painful social duty of leaving your calling card. The caption reads starkly: 'Advice to bores: follow your card upstairs and find out what they really think of you'

high Victorian fascination with decoration. Mr Compton Miller's collection includes card cases in tortoiseshell, tartan, ivory, papier mâché and Mauchline-ware. Many have been acquired in the shops of his now native Chelsea, others in markets over Britain and in France.

The most coveted case in Mr Compton Miller's own collection is a papier mâché case which is decorated with a painting of an old college, New College, Oxford (Fig 3). He also has three of different shapes on which Christ Church is depicted (Fig 4). These were probably made for Spiers of Oxford, dealers in 'fancy goods' and bought as souvenirs. Birmingham was the centre of card-case production, and Wolverhampton of papier mâché production (many can be seen in the Bantock House museum there today).

In the later part of the century, ivory and tortoiseshell cases were made in great numbers in the East for the European market, these examples in particular being intricately carved and decorated. Japanese examples were distinguished by their inlaid work, known as *shibayama*. Scotland, one of the most popular tourist destinations of the Victorian age, itself had several centres of production of the souvenir case and snuff-box. The light sycamore wood cases,

which often bear transfer print portraits of Robert Burns or Sir Walter Scott's romantic castellated home, Abbotsford, were made at Mauchline, Ayrshire. With mother-of-pearl examples, the decorative effect was usually achieved by the pattern of sheets—in the Great Exhibition of 1851 Richard Peters and Son of Birmingham included in their display 'card cases in various coloured pearls and tortoiseshell'. One incorporated 720 pieces.

In the 21st century, when so many of the more elaborate conventions of social life have disappeared, the jewel-like calling-card case has become a curiosity. Social and technological changes have submerged such ephemera as the snuff-box, the silver cigarette case and powder compact. The calling-card case is a miniature monument to social change. Mr Compton Miller's collection is also a microcosm of the fashionable decorative skills of the 19th-century industrial age.

PHOTOGRAPHS: JULIAN NIEMAY

(Below, from left) 6—A dark tortoiseshell case carved with a Chinese design of pagodas and mandarins; a Mauchline-ware case decorated with a transfer of a popular image of the poet Robert Burns; a tortoiseshell case with a Classical temple front in relief

