

Powerful and ignored: the history of the electric drill in Australia

Written by Tom Lee, Lecturer, Faculty of Design and Architecture Building, University of Technology Sydney

Portable electric drills didn't always look like oversized handguns.

Before Alonzo G. Decker and Samuel D. Black intervened [in the 1910s](#), the machines typically required the use of both hands. The two men, founders of the eponymous American company Black & Decker, developed a portable electric drill that incorporated a pistol grip and trigger switch, apparently inspired by Samuel Colt's pistol.

We are documenting [a collection](#) of more than 50 portable electric drills made roughly between 1930 and 1980.

Seen as part of a history of technology, they have a lot to teach us about function and form, masculine values and the history of Australian craft.

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The collection also represents an important chapter in Australian manufacturing, and includes drills produced by local companies such as [Sher](#), KBC and [Lightburn](#) that have since disappeared. It also features models made by Black & Decker, which [once had](#) manufacturing operations in Australia.

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The electric drill in Australia

Australia once played a significant role in producing the portable electric drill.

Ken Bowes & Co. Ltd, known as KBC, was a South Australian manufacturing company founded in 1936. Although it produced domestic appliances such as the [bean slicer](#), die casting of military components such as ammunition parts (shell and bomb noses) and tank attack guns kept the company busy during World War II.

It appears that KBC entered the hardware market in 1948 with its first portable electric drill, designed for the cabinet maker and general handyman. The body of the drill was made from die-cast zinc alloy and it had a unique removable front plate on the handle to allow the user easy access to the connection terminals.



KBC drill and label (note the lack of integration between handle and body), circa 1950s. [Berto Pandolfo](#)

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Author provided

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In 1956, Black & Decker established an Australian manufacturing plant in Croydon, Victoria, where drills such as [the CP2](#) were manufactured.

Between 1960 and 1982, many power tool brands had a media presence. KBC sponsored a radio program called, appropriately enough, That's The Drill. Wolf power tools were awarded as prizes on the television program Pick-A-Box.

Black & Decker ran advertisements that appeared during popular television programs and used endorsements by sporting celebrities such as cricketer Dennis Lillee.

While the popularity of portable power drills has endured, the manufacture of these objects in Australia more or less vanished by the end of the 20th century.

Why we value some objects and not others

The portable electric drill has been poorly documented by designers, historians and museums.

Obvious repositories for their collection, such as museums of technology or innovation, are increasingly challenged by space and funding pressures. Apart from a few token examples, many everyday objects have not managed to establish a museum presence.

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney holds at least two vintage portable electric drills: one is a [Desouthers](#), made in England, and [another drill](#) of unknown origin. Museums Victoria has one [example of a Black & Decker](#) electric drill from the 1960s in its digital archive.

The crude utility of the portable drill is part of the reason why it has escaped much academic scrutiny.



[The case for the drill](#)

Hard yakka and aesthetics have not typically been happy bedfellows. However, [labour and its associated objects](#) can provide a compelling look at contemporary life.

Like the laptop computer, the shape of which is tied to the [“macho mystique” of the briefcase](#), the pistol form of the portable drill seems to be significantly influenced by ideas of power and masculinity.

[The symbolic association with the pistol](#) is also practical, and would have no doubt eased the burden for those early users struggling with the device’s weight.

Read More: [Apple’s goodbye to the MP3 player reminds us why the iPod became an instant classic](#)

A recent [turn towards the everyday](#) as a site for design anthropology will hopefully shift focus towards inconspicuous yet important technologies like portable electric drills.

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These objects are part of a rich history that will be forgotten if institutions focus exclusively on luxury items, big name designers and cultures of display and ornament.

Even our most anonymous objects are sources of cultural expression, and they should not be overlooked.

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