

A Long Tradition

Founded in 1782, at the time of Louis XVI, the Locksmith King, BRICARD has kept over 30,000 antique models in its archives, and can today still cast, carve, gold-plate and assemble to order locks, cretonne bolts, espagnolettes, keys and any other rare items jealously reserved for the enjoyment of connoisseurs.

A brief history

If we understand the term 'lock' to mean any mechanism used to close a door, then locksmithing has been around since Antiquity...

Click on the headings above to learn about the six major parts of its history throughout the ages.

Antiquity

If we understand the term 'lock' to mean any mechanism, regardless of how crude, used to close a door, then locks have been with us since Antiquity. Although antique locks have disappeared with the doors that bore them, a number of bronze keys have been found at the excavation sites at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

The abundance of iron in Gaul would explain why the Gallo-Roman keys discovered there were made of this metal, especially given how talented our ancestors were in working with it.

Roman spatula key: the openwork plates lift the moving parts of the lock
First signum with just the seal.

Serrated key: evolution of the Laconian key.

Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, doors were locked via a latch on the interior, which was worked by a handle on the exterior.

This method was replaced around the 15th Century by the lock known as "staple plate lock", which was made up of a horizontal sliding bolt, operated by two flat ballotiere knobs on the interior and exterior. This horizontal bolt is immobilised by a vertical bolt operated by key from the exterior.

At this time, it was also customary to fit locks to chests. These would be made of thin plates of iron, carved in the style of the day and applied onto a flat background.

A sheet of coloured leather or a red cloth was often slid on the inside of this ornamentation in order to accentuate the carving. The main part was a clasp, which was fixed to the lid of the chest. When the lid of the chest was closed, this clasp would fall into place exactly on the face of the lock.

These locks, decorated with curious designs, rosettes, small columns, arches, niches, sheltering a crowd of tiny characters, were magnificent sculptures carved from the block, tailored with graver and chisel, and were as precious and valuable as the finest pieces of goldsmithing work.

Illustration: Iron key (12th Century). The point disengages the lock mechanism.

Renaissance

From the Renaissance, locks comprised a rectangular casing, which contained one or several bolts operated from the interior by a key and from the exterior by a sliding knob.

It was in this era that first mention was made of master keys. Accounts of the King's residences tell us that in 1547, Henri II had fitted to the door of Diane de Poitiers, "three large locks, which were opened by a key held by the King and which fitted anywhere".

The 17th Century saw the first manufacture of locks known as "Bénardes", which could be opened by key from both sides.

Until this point, the locks had been made of iron, and were sometimes gilded with leaf.

It was under the reign of Louis XIV that the first bronze locks appeared, carved or gold-plated with mercury for decorating the rich apartments of Versailles.

In this period, the first double-knobs were used for operating spring bolts from both the interior and exterior.

In the 18th Century, great artists such as CAFFIERI, MEISONIER, DELAFOSSE, FORESTIER and GOUTHIER took an interest in the art of locksmithing, upon which some veritable masterpieces emerged from their workshops. Some of this work appears in the BRICARD collection.

CHAMBERLLAN'S KEYS:

The chamberlain was a court officer responsible for all things relating to the interior service of the King's chamber. As an insignia, he wore a bronze gilded key attached to a cord, and wore this ostensibly on his chest. This key was often also a master key and was decorated with the coat of arms of the country of origin of its bearer.

In 1823, Morisot, a building inspector, gave the following definition: there are two aspects to ironmongery. One comprises all of the objects produced in the workshop by forge and file, such as iron bars, gates, handrails, balconies, etc.

The other includes manufactured objects, which come under the general heading of hardware.

In fact, from the 13th Century the term 'hardware' has appeared in the book of trades of Etienne Boileaux, provost of Paris at the time of Louis IX. "All merchants selling hardware, such as earthenware pots, dishes, platters, winnowing baskets, and such, must each pay four Paris deniers." This enumeration demonstrates that, since the origins of the trade, the hardware merchant has not only sold the customary metal objects, but all products necessary for domestic practices. The often pejorative sense of the term should be refuted, since it is known today that the major lock manufacturers in the 19th and 20th Century, Bricard, Vaillant, Fontaine, and Fichet, are the

natural successors of hardware merchants, who, although their trade was less prestigious than that of locksmiths, were no less indispensable to people in daily life.

The history of Parisian trades until the 18th Century is full of disputes over precedence, prerogatives, legal proceedings, and appeals to the King to limit competition between iron tradesmen. These disputes were, for the most part, started by the master locksmiths, anxious to protect their privileges. In 1537, at the request of the wards of the trade, King Henri II granted letters of patent to locksmiths, stipulating that the "iron craftsmen, haberdashers and merchants trading in objects that concerned or were dependent on the trade or manufacture of locksmithing shall be subject to the visit of the locksmiths' jurors". These haberdashery merchants sold iron bars, lead, copper, items of cutlery, and hardware, as well as padlocks and other types of lock. King Louis XIII confirmed their status in January 1613. The 12th March 1677 saw a decree of parliament concerning the visit of locksmiths' jurors to craftsmen who sold locks and other items of ironwork.

This decree stated that: "the court has maintained and reserved the right of master locksmiths to visit twice a year the shops and homes of the said haberdashery merchants, concerning locks, hinges, cleats, bolts and pins relating to doors and windows of houses only, pursuant to and in accordance with the decree of 26th June 1638; it is the responsibility of the locksmiths' jurors to warn the said haberdashery merchants to assist the said jurors with the said visit without charge. It is prohibited for the said locksmiths to visit the other fittings. Nor is it allowed for them to sell or produce any locksmithing goods other than those manufactured in their homes or shops".

On several occasions, and again in 1776, police orders were enacted to prohibit scrap metal merchants from repairing old keys; some articles even stipulated that all new or old keys, which did not have a lock, must be handed over to the police within 15 days. Failure to do so was punishable by fine..."

The shop signs themselves were not always of much help to the client interested in buying locksmithing equipment. Master locksmiths would often suspend a key or two keys on a chain at the top of their workshops, but they certainly did not have the monopoly on this "sign". In 1730, a certain Jean Nolan, hardware merchant in Paris, did not hesitate to call himself: "contractor of ironwork and locksmithing". In 1746, the locksmiths' community lost a lawsuit and had to pay 190 pounds compensation to a scrap metal merchant named Nicolas Magny, from whom they had had seized old keys, locks and paint.

However, in spite of these disputes, the day-to-day reality was quite different. Locksmiths and hardware merchants were more often mutually dependent rather than competitors in the construction market.

An increasing number of locksmiths made a living by buying ready-made locks, whilst they themselves manufactured less and less. They were nonetheless obliged to manufacture a lock and key whenever they wanted to demonstrate their experience or craftsmanship in order to be accepted into the community of locksmiths.

Many reasons to explain why wrought iron was abandoned: one of its biggest downfalls was undoubtedly the dryness of the classic style. Once the scrolling acanthus and rocailles fell out of fashion, the Louis XV style would be accused of excessive "lightness and licentiousness" and would disappear from artistic ironwork to be replaced by the straight, geometric and regular shapes brought to prominence by Neufforge, Moreau and Forty, amongst others.

Another contributing factor to the demise of iron was the progressive use of malleable cast-iron, and the extraordinary enthusiasm that it generated starting with the Revolution and continuing through the Empire period. The work of Réaumur beginning in 1722 and the Academy of Science in the 18th Century on the transformation of iron allowed malleable cast-iron to become the privileged material of metal craftsmen. Freed of its excess oxygen, cast-iron became easier to work with chisel and file. Despite the resistance of locksmiths, resulting in a number of lawsuits, they had to give way to the foundry owners, who, as early as the Regency, were able to manufacture lock casings, door knockers, decorative plates, balconies or window ledges in cast-iron.