

It is all about Polyoxybenzylmethyleneglycolanhydride

or $(C_6H_6O-CH_2O)_n$

Our late Roger Burrows.

Actually we will make it easy for the non-chemists in the society and just call it Baekerlite. Oh well, if you insist, Bakelite. Bakelite is a thermo-setting phenol-formaldehyde resin developed by the Belgian-American Leo Baekland in New York c.1907. It was one of the first plastics and was prized for its non-conductivity and widely used in electrical insulators, radio and telephone cases, light switches, power points and plugs. It was actually a clear product but wood and asbestos fibres were used to strengthen it and this gave the brownish colour we associate with the product. When it was clear it was even made into jewellery and, with a yellow dye, into synthetic amber. It was nominated as a National Chemical Landmark on 9 November 1993 for its significance as the world's first synthetic plastic.



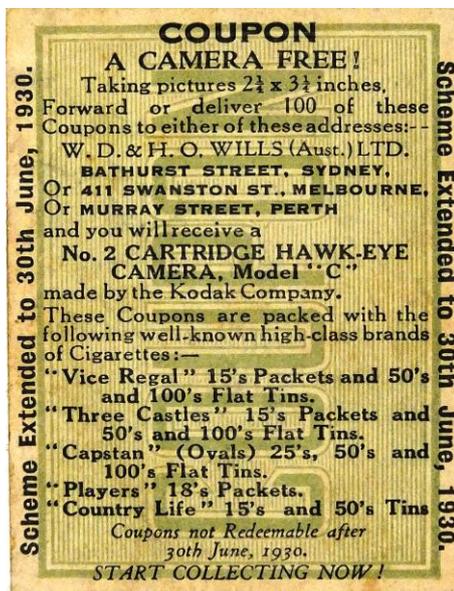
Pic. 1. Hawkette.

Once Baekland's patents had run out in 1927 there were many different manufacturers ready to use this new product and improve on it, if possible, and among them makers of cameras. When you consider that the body and bed of a folding camera or the body and film carrier assembly could be moulded to a finished state with minimal screws for hinges and shutter mounts it must have made a significant saving on the cost structure. No pressing, trimming, covering or painting required and you could have all sorts of fancy patterns or embellishments and also a variety of colours.

The first camera to be made of Bakelite is generally considered to be the Rajar No. 6, c. 1929. It was made by A.P.M. Ltd. of London and the next seems to be the Kodak Hawkette No. 2, in 1930. This was described as a

premium camera; that means you saved up tokens from Cadbury's chocolate and when you had the required amount sent them off and claimed your camera. In Australia it was cigarettes and you sent off your tokens to W.D. and H.O. Wills to claim your camera.

(Pic. 1.) Pics 2 and 2a show typical tokens.



Pics 2 and 2a. Token actual size $2 \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ inches (51 x 64 mm).

The next manufacturer was Soho Ltd., also of London, and they produced the Cadet and the Model B in 1930 (**Pic. 3.**) They also produced the Pilot in 1933 and that was the end of their run with Bakelite cameras.

Even Zeiss got onto the bandwagon producing a couple of cameras in 1933 and 1934. (**Pic. 4**) The manufacturer who stayed with the material the longest would have to be Kodak. Let's start with the Baby Brownie: a beautiful Teague Art Deco design that arrived in 1934, the Baby Brownie Special in 1939 and the Six-20 Bull's-Eye in 1938. (**Pic. 5.**)



Pic 3. Soho Cadet and Model B.



Pic. 4. Zeiss Simplex.



Pic. 5. Baby Brownie, Special Brownie and Bull's-Eye.

Now if we look at Lyle Curr's beloved Kodak 35 the centre part of the body was moulded Bakelite and that continued through till 1948. (**Pic. 6.**) The Brownie Bull's-Eye is also listed as being made of Bakelite, as also is the Photax (**Pic. 7**) from France. The Brownie 127 is, but the Cresta is not. It appears that 1960 would see the last of the Bakelite cameras so what is the fascination? The great flaw with Bakelite was that it was brittle. So, to get strength, it required thicker walls in the moulded product and therefore more weight and material were needed. Hence the newer plastics took over and Bakelite was relegated after a reign of 30 years. The other flaw was that it becomes more brittle with age, which is why it has become very hard to find perfect models from the 1930s. There is usually a small chip or piece missing off a corner but that's what makes collecting fun: finding that special item.



Pic. 6. Kodak 35.



Pic. 7. Photax.

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