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A History of the Shell Oil Logo



circa 1900 to 1904



circa 1904 to 1909



circa 1930 to 1948



circa 1930 to 1948



circa 1955 to 1961



circa 1961 to 1971

The Shell Oil Company has its roots in shells – ornamental and collectable sea shells. Way back in 1833, a trader named Marcus Samuel opened a small shop in London dealing in antiques, curios and sea shells. His shells were bought by natural historians who were serious collectors, and were also sold to the Victorians who used them to decorate their jewel boxes and such.

Shortly after his son joined the business Marcus Samuel travelled to the Caspian Sea coast in search of exotic shells, and there he recognised an opportunity for exporting oil to the Far East for use in lamps and cooking. The first special oil tanker had been commissioned by 1882, and within fifteen years the Shell company had merged with its Dutch rival to make one of the world's first oil conglomerates.

Around the turn of last century a Pecten seashell had been chosen as their emblem, likely because each of Samuel's tankers carrying kerosene to the Far East had been named after a different seashell. It is believed the name 'Shell' and Pecten symbol may have been suggested to Samuel and Co. by a man Mr Graham, who imported Samuel's kerosene into India and sold it as 'Graham's Oil'. Mr Graham subscribed capital to the Shell Transport and Trading Company and became a director.

There is also evidence that the Pecten emblem was featured on Mr Graham's Spanish ancestral family coat of arms.

The scallop shell was later chosen to replace the pecten emblem because of its archetypal shape that was more easily reproduced and recognised. Following modern trends in graphic art, the Shell logo has continually evolved over the years to become the concise, clean and stylised design that it is today.

We are not certain of the specific origin of the Shell colors red and yellow, but it is believed Samuel and Company first shipped kerosene to the Far East in red painted tin containers.

Early last century when the Shell Company built new petrol filling stations in California there was much market competition. Bright colours were a means of providing Shell products with a strong brand identity, and the stark red and yellow colors of Spain may have been chosen to appeal to the hearts of California's many Spanish settlers.

It is also thought the Shell Oil colours may have been inspired by Mr Graham's Scottish heritage, as red and yellow are the basis of the Royal Standard of Scotland.

The Shell logo – or Pecten – remains one of the greatest brand symbols of Modern times, and old Shell oil and petrol tins, early Shell enamel and metal service station signs, vintage Shell bowlers and merchandise are prized by serious collectables of motoring memorabilia and garagenalia.