



# KING CORONET

## The Coronet Camera Company

In the inter-war period and post-war commercial landscape of Britain, the Coronet Camera Company in Birmingham was one of the few major home camera manufacturers able to compete alongside Kodak. Founded in 1926 by F.W. Pettifer, it continued production of budget-priced cameras until 1967.

The Second World War notwithstanding, this period can be considered to be the halcyon days of British camera manufacture. From the turn of the century and Kodak's introduction of the roll-film, photography had moved from being the specialist preserve of scientists and commercial studios with their big heavy plate cameras, to a leisure pursuit available to all classes across society.

The simple box camera was cheap enough for everybody and the local chemist would develop your film and produce prints by contact directly from the film. For those with a little more money, the more compact foldable bellows camera was available. This was the territory in which Coronet thrived, producing box and folding cameras at the low end of the price and quality spectrum and selling them in great numbers.

Though they were generally cheap, they were well designed and robustly manufactured to the extent that they endure to this day and can be found on many a car boot sale stall and on on-line auction sites.

To a modern eye, there seems to be little to choose between one old box camera and another. They are all the same shape, have simple rotary low speed shutters, small lenses and practically nothing else. But Coronet made their mark, competing head-on with Kodak and Houghton-Butcher – one of the few other major British manufacturers. Their designs were attractive, individual and incorporated decorative features such as those of the Art Deco period. Their folding bellows cameras were also smart attractive designs, which belied their cheap indifferent optics. Frequently found today, they remain presentable and collectable.

Names are a great tool for marketing and promoting goods, and Coronet knew their value, as did most companies, in selling their cameras. The Coronet name itself operated in the same way as a modern brand name and the names they gave their various models seem to harken back to a more innocent and pioneering time in Britain's commercial history:

Ambassador, Rapide, Clipper, Rex, Conway, Vogue, Cameo, Cub, Captain, Consul, Warwick, the list continues. Mind you, there were some other 'memorable' names such as the D20 and F20.

In the early '30's, new revolutionary camera designs were coming out of Germany: The Precision Leica 35mm miniature camera and Rolleiflex twin lens roll-film cameras were beautiful precision manufacture instruments both desirable and unobtainable for the average British camera buyer, because of their high cost.

Right at the bottom of the market, Coronet had their models that might suffice. You may not have a Leica, but you could buy a Coronet Cub which also used 35mm miniature film, and might just look a little bit like a Leica – at least from a distance. And for the Ladies there was the Coronet Vogue with a similar but unique film format all of its own.

After the war, German cameras were even less obtainable due to import tariffs. With a protected market, the post-war years were good for home manufacturers. Coronet produced the D20 and F20 hybrid Twin Lens Reflex cameras. These were certainly not Rolleiflexes, but little more than box cameras with large bright viewfinders. They were popular and durable, as evidenced by the number still around today.

Optics have always been an issue for British camera manufacturers. The high cost of their development meant that few home produced lenses were available. As well as using British lenses, Coronet circumvented the post-war import restrictions by partnering with the French firm Trianty who also provided lenses. This allowed them to sell cameras into France as well as providing them with a supply and manufacturing arm allowing them to offer a larger range of cameras to the home market, some of which were made in France.

If this had been the extent of the company's contribution to the field of British camera manufacture, their position in history would have remained significant and assured. But there was one area where Coronet not only established themselves, but excelled and arguably reigned supreme. And that was in the employment of bakelite.

Bakelite emerged in the '30's as the first commercially viable plastic. Ideal for a huge variety of domestic goods and electrical components, it was easily cast to any shape and combined with metal components. It proved the perfect material for camera manufacture as the same time that the Art Deco movement extended its influence into many areas of product design.

Coronet used it to great effect in their later post-war box cameras for the front lens and shutter sub-assemblies, the main body of the cameras being of metal. It is one of the reasons perhaps, why these cameras still sold at a time when the box camera configuration was reaching the end of its days, an outdated dinosaur in the approaching age dominated by the eye-level viewfinder camera.

Coronet's stereo camera of 1955 is perhaps the most striking example of their mastery in the use of bakelite. The paint spatter effect on this camera, has to be seen to be believed. From the mid '30's however, it had formed the basis of several of their designs. The miniature Vogue of 1936 and the Cub of 1938 are two examples. Post war, their main offering to the eye-level camera user were the angular bakelite Cadet and Flashmaster.

But to most camera historians and collectors, the name Coronet is synonymous with just one particular model. Produced from the early '30's, it was a minute simple camera of bakelite with a tiny Taylor-Hobson lens that shot just 6 exposures on a short strip of 16mm film. The Coronet midget cost five shillings and sixpence new – yes, that's 28p! Today, a single example can fetch upwards of £350.

What makes them so collectable is the simple fact that they were produced in patterned bakelite in a number of different colours. So collectors compete to collect a full set of the six main colours with some variants. Some colours are rare so the price for these skyrockets. But a completed set, which I have on show here, is a beautiful sight to behold, rivaling the most desirable of gemstone necklaces (If you are a camera collector, that is). Such is Coronet's eighty year legacy.

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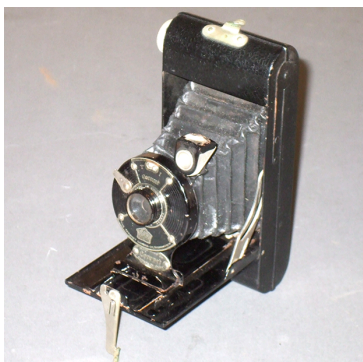
## CORONET CAMERAS ON DISPLAY:



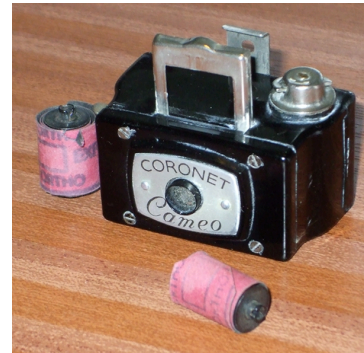
*Early box cameras from Coronet. 1930 to 1935. Leatherette covered cardboard bodies with metal inner chassis, rod-based film winders, small reflex viewfinders, simple meniscus lenses with fixed focus. The Warwick is in the centre. Coloured and patterned fabric finishes gave more impact in the shop window and helped increase sales.*



*More box cameras from the '30's. The centre example shows a rare shipping box displaying strong design and colouring that stands out. It makes good use of the crown – Coronet's motif. The Rex (right) is from 1950 and has a stamped metal front plate. Made by Trianty in France for Coronet it looks dated, even for the '50's, with its small dim viewfinders.*



*Three examples of Drop-bed folding bellows rollfilm cameras. These became popular in the '30's because of their compactness and portability when folded up. Although these are all of low specification they are robust and all still work because of the simplicity of their construction. Designed to be used at waist level, they are smart and stylish and are presentable today. The Rapide (right) is from the '50's and employs an eye level viewfinder and shutter release link in its pressed metal side panel. Technically however, this type of camera couldn't compete with the much higher specification Kodak Retinas, Agfa Isolettes and Zeis Ikons that would emerge from Germany.*



Three unique camera designs from Coronet. The Vogue (left) of 1936 was unashamedly pitched at the ladies. With a simple sprung drop down bed it had no adjustments and used a specially spooled roll of 35mm film. The Cub (Centre) employed a sprung metal barrel to bring the lens out and used 828 film – another 35mm rollfilm introduced by Kodak, that proved short-lived. Post-war, the Cameo of 1948 was introduced (right). Of minute proportions, this shot 6 exposures on 16mm film.



Three pre-war examples of the Conway Popular marque of box cameras. These were of slightly higher specification than the basic models of Coronet's range. The model of 1930 (left) in brown and black with a metal front incorporated close focusing and a green filter. Similarly with the 1935 model (centre). Both show the octagonal Conway surround to the lens and have much improved viewfinders with protective flip-up hoods to shield from the sun. The 1936 model (right) has a complete bakelite front sub assembly and Deco styling on its front metal plate. All have bakelite film wind knobs.



Post-war box cameras of the early '50's differed little from the late pre-war models. The Rex (left) and Ambassador (middle) featured metal bodies, bakelite fronts, green filters and Art Deco inspired front plates. Large bright meniscus lens viewfinders with flip-up shades significantly improved the ease of use of this final incarnation of the box camera. The D20 (right) was a cheap metal bodied equivalent to the precision twin lens reflex designs that gained post-war popularity. Taking 12 square pictures 6 x 6cm on 120 rollfilm, it did not need two viewfinders or to be flipped on its side between landscape and portrait aspects. The Deco geometry continues around the top of the body giving it a powerful if not handsome appearance. With a simple fixed focus lens and small reflex finder however, it is little more than a box camera with pretensions.



*The F20 Coro-Flash (left) was a restyled version of the D20 and, like the D20, had flash contact points. The Cadet of 1954 (centre) was a rollfilm eye-level viewfinder camera made entirely of Bakelite and styled completely around elements of Art Deco Geometry. The Flashmaster (right) was essentially the same model with flash synchronization contacts.*



*Three late additions to the collection on display: Mechanically the Coronet Captain and Consul (left and centre) were little different from the other bakelite / metal box cameras of the '50's such as the Ambassador. Both share an arresting green / silver late Deco design on their front plates. Additionally the Captain has a front lever for a close-up (or Portrait) lens. The final (right) model is from the '60's and is a very cheap and simple plastic (not bakelite) 127 format camera produced to compete with the Diana range of cheap cameras emerging from France. It has just 2 controls: a shutter release lever and a film winder.*



*The 1953 stereo camera unashamedly flaunts Coronet's mastery of bakelite production. With a single sliding blade shutter across both lenses it combines synchronous shutter operation with simplicity. With an arresting paint splatter finish it has both central eye-level and reflex viewfinders.*



*The jewel in the crown was the Midget. Produced from 1935, and of patterned colored two-tone bakelite. Using rolls of paper-backed 16mm film, they made just 6 exposures. With handsome brass front plates surrounding the f10 Taylor-Hobson lens, they sold for \$2.50 in America and 5/6 (28p) in Britain. They also featured in several promotions. They were produced in six basic colors: Brown, Olive Green, Light Green, Red, Blue and Black (not patterned). Some minor tonal variations of the Red and Olive Green can be found over their production cycle. As a result, gathering the full set of six or more becomes the goal of many collectors, which has pushed the price up to over £350 for good examples of the rarer colors. My set here contains the primary color set plus one variant of the olive green.*