

Bowie Knife by George Wostenholm & Son, circa 1855

By Rusty Edwards



G. Wostenholm & Son made this 15" Bowie knife about 1855 at their "Washington Works" in Sheffield, England. This handsome piece has an impressive clip point & decorative file work on the spine.

English cutler George Wostenholm sold large quantities of his Bowie knives to miners, gamblers, teamsters, laborers, and others during the California Gold Rush (1848-1855). He peddled thousands more to Union and Confederate soldiers during the American Civil War (1861-1865). Many of his knives had etched blades with patriotic themes and slogans. I bought one of these knives in 2025 for \$1,400. Several well-known auction houses, like Rock Island and Morphy, have offered nearly identical knives for as much as \$8,000.

How do I know this knife was made about 1855? Robert Abels was an author and respected knife collector during the 1960s. He wrote three books about Bowie knives and displayed his collection at gatherings like the Ohio Historical Association annual meeting. On page 35 of his book *"Classic Bowie Knives,"* Abels shows a nearly identical Wostenholm I*XL Bowie knife from the 1850 era. On pages 130-131 of another book, *"Sheffield Bowie & Pocket Knife Makers 1825-1925,"* author Richard Washer shows four more nearly identical Wostenholm I*XL Bowie knives from the same period.

About 95 percent of all Bowie knives sold in the United States between the California Gold Rush and the American Civil War were made in Sheffield, England or Solingen, Germany. These international knife-making centers had the expertise, facilities, manpower, and materials to produce large quantities of the finest cutlery available.



Part of Robert Abels' Collection

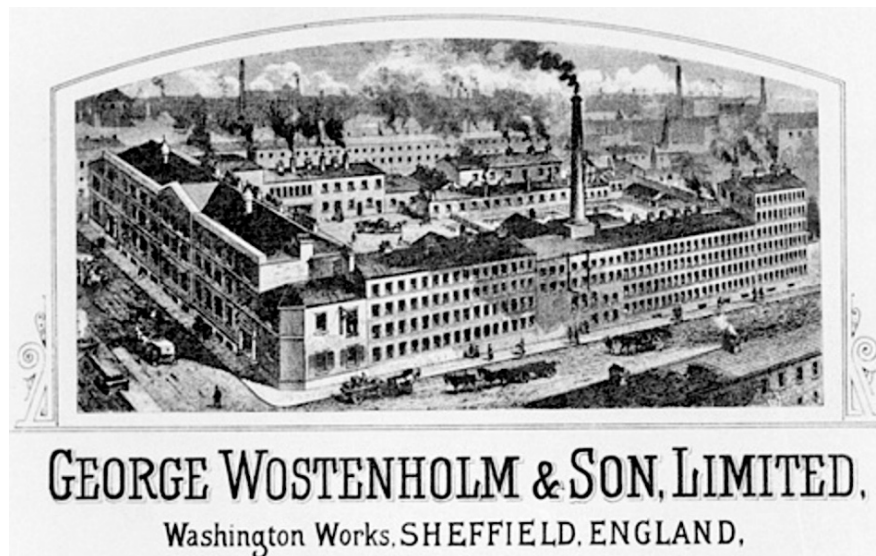
Knives were important implements during the 19th century. People used them for hundreds of routine tasks, like skinning animals, butchering meat, opening containers, and cutting cordage. They were also employed for personal protection. Most firearms at this time were single shot. Some were difficult to load and shoot, while others were considered unreliable. Because of these concerns, many individuals chose to carry knives. Foreign-made Bowie knives were particularly popular due to their quality, simplicity, and reliability.

George Wostenholm (1802-1876) was the most prolific maker of Bowie knives in the 1850s. He sold most of his blades in America where there was a robust demand for them. By the mid-19th century, his I*XL brand was one of the most famous in America. These three letters were shorthand for "I Excel."



George Wostenholm

Wostenholm had two important traits that propelled his success. First, he was a perfectionist who pushed his employees to produce the highest quality knives. It's said he personally inspected every blade prior to shipment. During this process, he'd tap each blade against an anvil while listening for a particular sound. If a blade emitted a different sound, he'd have it destroyed. Second, Wostenholm was a superb salesman. Records show he sailed to America 30 times to promote his products. This was dangerous travel. Each crossings took several weeks aboard a ship powered only by wind or a primitive steam engine. By 1861, his Washington Works in Sheffield employed 850 men, women, and children.





This knife blade is marked “G. Wostenholm & Son, Washington Works, None Are Genuine but Those Marked I*XL.” At some point, the maker shortened his last name to Wostenholm, so it would fit his smaller blades.



There’s an acid-etching and several stampings on the blade. The etching depicts a set of clasped hands surrounded by multiple banners with the declaration: “*The Americans Give the Right Hand of Fellowship to All Nations and Own a Universal Brotherhood.*” The stampings include: 1) “G. Wostenholm & Son Washington Works,” 2) an eagle with extended wings, 3) the Wostenholm I*XL trademark, and 4) a banner with the words “The Real I*XL Knife.”



The coffin-shaped stag handle has a German-Silver escutcheon on the left panel. The extra wide, full-length tang helps offset the weight of the 10” blade. To ensure a tight fit, the Washington Works installed a brass liner between the stag panels and tang.



The disposition of the original scabbard is unknown. The replacement is over 80 years old. It has a brass guide that keeps the blade centered when it's inserted into the scabbard.



Brass Blade Guide