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**The Development of A Low Cost  
Non-destructive Inspection System for  
Plating Quality Assessment of  
Plated-through Holes in Printed Circuit Boards**

**A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Technology  
in the  
Department of Production Technology  
at  
Massey University**

**KAM CHIU MAK**

**1995**

## *ABSTRACT*

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The status of printed circuit board inspection is reviewed with special focus placed on the existing techniques of assessing plated-through hole quality. The need for developing a non-destructive method for plated-through hole inspection has been identified and is the major objective of this research.

The results of the investigation into various methods that could lead to this objective are presented. This investigation has been concerned with the application of image processing techniques and the leakage light detection method. The hardware and software requirements for automatic visual inspection of stuffed board components are established initially using available equipment from the Department of Production Technology.

Image processing techniques are found to be capable of discriminating copper-plated and unplated surfaces using the difference in reflectance between the surfaces. This suggests the possibility of applying such techniques to assess the quality of through-hole plating.

The leakage light detection method can be implemented to assess the plating coverage of plated-through holes. A low cost inspection system demonstrating the principle of leakage light detection has been constructed. This system is particularly relevant to the small batch manufacturers in the printed circuit board industry.

The performance of the demonstration system has illustrated the simplicity and reliability of the design. It is concluded that the leakage light detection technology offers a practical low cost solution for non-destructive plated-through hole inspection.

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

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I wish to thank my supervisors, Professor Bob Hodgson and Dr Roger Browne, for all the guidance, the support, and the time they generously provided during the course of the work. I am also indebted to Dr Ross Nilson for his valuable comments and suggestions at various stages of this research.

Messrs Dexter Muir, Ken Mercer, Farshad Nourozi, Gary Allen and Peter Haw are thanked for their helpful technical support.

I also wish to thank my sister-in-law, Marlene, and her husband, Shaoquan (Dr Liu), for proof-reading this text. Finally, I shall always be grateful to my wife, Yvonne, for her understanding and tolerance to my frequent staying up late during the preparation of this thesis.

# **CONTENTS**

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<b>ABSTRACT</b>	ii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	iii
<b>LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES</b>	viii
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	ix
<b>CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	2
1.2 Printed Circuit Board Manufacturers	3
1.2.1 Example of a small batch production facility	3
1.2.2 Competitive strategy of small batch manufacturers	4
1.2.3 Meeting the needs of the small batch manufacturers	4
1.3 Objective, Scope and Relevance of this Research	5
1.3.1 Main objective	5
1.3.2 Scope	5
1.3.3 Relevance	6
1.4 List of Conference Papers Published	6
1.5 Organisation of this Thesis	6
<b>CHAPTER 2 - PRINTED CIRCUIT BOARD MANUFACTURING</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Standards and Specifications	11
2.2.1 Documentation	11
2.2.2 Performance classification of PCBs	12
2.3 Double-sided Plated-through Hole Printed Circuit Boards	13
2.3.1 Material	14
2.3.2 Manufacturing process	15
2.4 Production of Plated-through Holes	19
2.4.1 Design requirements	20
2.4.1.1 Hole size	20
2.4.1.2 Plating thickness	21
2.4.1.3 Acceptability criteria	21
2.4.2 Key processes of plated-through hole production	22
2.4.2.1 Drilling	22
2.4.2.2 Deburring/desmearing	23
2.4.2.3 Electroless copper plating	23
2.4.2.4 Electroplating	24
2.4.3 Summary	25
<b>CHAPTER 3 - PRINTED CIRCUIT BOARD INSPECTION</b>	<b>26</b>
3.1 Introduction	27
3.1.1 In-process inspection	27
3.1.2 Bare board testing and inspection	28
3.1.3 The move towards automatic visual inspection	29
3.1.4 Standard test patterns and test coupons	29

3.2	Surface Conductor Defects and Inspection	31
3.2.1	Common surface conductor defects	31
3.2.2	Inspecting surface conductors	33
3.3	Plated-through Hole Defects and Inspection	33
3.3.1	Common plated-through hole defects	34
3.3.2	Outgassing	35
3.3.3	Inspecting plated-through holes	36
3.3.3.1	Destructive testing	36
3.3.3.2	Non-destructive testing	37
3.4	Inspecting Stuffed Board Components	39
3.5	Improving Plated-through Hole Inspection	40
3.5.1	Disadvantages of using test coupons	40
3.5.2	Leakage light detection	41
3.6	Discussion	42

#### **CHAPTER 4 - PLATED-THROUGH HOLE INSPECTION USING IMAGE PROCESSING TECHNIQUES**

		43
4.1	Introduction	44
4.2	Spectral Reflectance Measurements	44
4.2.1	Spectral reflectance of materials	44
4.2.2	Equipment	45
4.2.3	Sample preparation	46
4.2.4	Results	48
4.3	Methods to Discriminate between Plated and Unplated Regions	49
4.3.1	Sample preparation	50
4.3.2	Equipment	50
4.3.2.1	Light source	50
4.3.2.2	CCD camera	51
4.3.2.3	Frame grabber	51
4.3.2.4	NIH Image software	52
4.3.3	Image capture	53
4.3.4	Image enhancement analysis	55
4.3.5	Local histogram analysis	56
4.4	Discussion	57
4.4.1	Prospect for a prototype inspection system	59

#### **CHAPTER 5 - ALTERNATIVE SCHEMES FOR NON-DESTRUCTIVE INSPECTION OF PLATED-THROUGH HOLES**

		61
5.1	The PCB Panel After Electroless Plating	62
5.2	Penetrant Flaw Detection	62
5.3	Electromagnetic Radiation as Penetrant	63
5.4	Visible Light	63
5.4.1	Experiments	63
5.4.2	Results	64
5.5	Spectral Transmittance	65
5.5.1	Transmittance of light in epoxy-glass substrate	66
5.6	Microwaves	67
5.6.1	Preliminary conjecture	67
5.6.2	Expert advice	68

5.7	Radio Waves	69
5.8	Discussion	70
<b>CHAPTER 6 - PLATED-THROUGH HOLE INSPECTION USING LEAKAGE LIGHT DETECTION</b>		72
6.1	Leakage Light Detection	73
6.1.1	The principle	73
6.1.2	Assumptions	74
6.1.3	Technical requirements	74
6.2	Selection of a Suitable Sensor	75
6.2.1	The criteria	75
6.2.2	Experiments	76
6.2.2.1	OPCON linescan system	76
6.2.2.2	Using a phototransistor	78
6.2.2.3	Using a photodiode with built-in amplification	79
6.2.3	Discussion	81
6.3	A Demonstration System for PTH Leakage Light Detection	82
6.3.1	Overview of the design	82
6.3.2	The sensing head	83
6.3.3	The illumination system	84
6.3.4	Signal processing electronics	87
6.4	Operating the System	88
6.4.1	Inspection software	88
6.4.2	Calibration	89
6.4.3	Operating procedure	89
6.4.4	Performance	90
6.4.5	Limitations	90
6.5	Discussion	91
<b>CHAPTER 7 - INSPECTION OF STUFFED BOARD COMPONENTS</b>		93
7.1	Justification for Inspection	94
7.2	Checking Component Orientations	94
7.2.1	Experimental setup	95
7.2.2	Image processing techniques involved	95
7.2.3	Limitations	98
7.3	Selection from Available Equipment	99
7.3.1	Available equipment	100
7.3.2	Summary of results	100
7.4	Discussion	100
<b>CHAPTER 8 - SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION</b>		102
8.1	Overview	103
8.1.1	Electrical testing	103
8.1.2	Visual inspection	103
8.1.3	Automatic visual inspection systems	104
8.1.4	Plated-through hole inspection	104
8.2	Inspection Strategy of Printed Circuit Board Manufacturers	105
8.2.1	Possible impact of low cost automatic inspection systems	106
8.3	Research on Non-destructive Inspection of Plated-through Holes	107

8.3.1	Image processing techniques	107
8.3.2	Leakage light detection	108
8.3.3	Justification for focusing on a leakage light detection system	108
<b>CHAPTER 9 - CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK</b>		<b>109</b>
9.1	Conclusions	109
9.2	Recommendations for Future Work	110
<b>APPENDICES</b>		
Appendix 1-1	Some of the early printed circuit patents granted to Eisler	112
Appendix 2-1	Panel size to manufacturing operation relationships	112
Appendix 2-2	The manufacturing process for double-sided PCBs with PTHs	112
Appendix 2-3	Steps of electroless copper plating	114
Appendix 2-4	Chemistry of electroless copper plating	115
Appendix 3-1	Sample of a PTH test pattern	116
Appendix 3-2	Image processing techniques for surface conductor inspection	117
Appendix 3-3	Standard micro-sectioning procedure	118
Appendix 4-1	Listing of macros for the image enhancement method	120
Appendix 4-2	Establishing an optimum number of pixels for each ROI	120
Appendix 5-1	Expert comments on the application of microwave to PTH inspection	129
Appendix 6-1	Response of the MFOD73	130
Appendix 6-2	Characteristics of the IPL photodetector	131
Appendix 7-1	NIH Image commands for component polarity inspection	132
Appendix 7-2	Selection of equipment for stuffed board component inspection	132
<b>REFERENCES</b>		<b>136</b>

# ***LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES***

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## ***FIGURES***

Figure 2.1	The key manufacturing processes of PCBs	18
Figure 2.2	Definitions of terms	20
Figure 2.3	Example of through-hole plating thickness	21
Figure 3.1	Common PCB surface conductor defects	32
Figure 3.2	Common plated-through hole defects	34
Figure 3.3	Generation and effect of outgassing	35
Figure 3.4	The backlight test	37
Figure 3.5	Detecting leakage light in defective PTHs	41
Figure 4.1	Principle of measuring absorbance by the MPS-5000	46
Figure 4.2	The four samples for absorbance measurements	47
Figure 4.3	Difference in spectral absorbance between rough and smooth epoxy-glass surfaces	48
Figure 4.4	Spectral absorbance of copper and epoxy-glass	49
Figure 4.5	Setup for image capture under a microscope	53
Figure 4.6	Area of a sample to be captured	54
Figure 4.7	A pair of captured images	54
Figure 4.8	Image enhancement result compared to the actual plating voids	55
Figure 4.9	Scatter diagram for classifying plated and unplated surfaces	57
Figure 5.1	Spectral transmittance of epoxy-glass	66
Figure 6.1	Alternative arrangement for detecting leakage light in defective PTHs	73
Figure 6.2	Setup for PTH leakage light detection using the OPCON system	77
Figure 6.3	Results of PTH leakage light detection using the OPCON system	78
Figure 6.4	Response of the IPL photodetector	80
Figure 6.5	Construction of the sensing head	83
Figure 6.6	Location of the three photodetectors	84
Figure 6.7	A cross-sectional view of the sensing head	85
Figure 6.8	The inspection action	86
Figure 6.9	Basic circuit diagram for the IPL photodetector	87
Figure 6.10	The signal processing electronics	87
Figure 6.11	Curve for calibrating the inspection system	89
Figure 7.1	Features indicating the polarities of DIPs	95
Figure 7.2	Images of DIPs before and after processing	97
Figure 7.3	Images of diodes before and after processing	98

## ***TABLES***

Table 2.1	Selected properties of two substrate materials	10
Table 2.2	Characteristics and dimensions of PCBs	10
Table 2.3	Standard laminate thickness for PCB manufacture	14
Table 2.4	Common printed circuit base materials	14
Table 2.5	Acceptability of through-hole plating	21
Table 3.1	Some test coupon testable parameters	30
Table 3.2	Some stuffed board component inspection systems	39

## *LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

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ANSI	American National Standard Institute
CAD	Computer aided design
CCD	Charge coupled device
DIP	Dual in line packaging
DPI	Dots per inch
IPC	Institute for Interconnecting and Packaging Electronic Circuits
IC	Integrated circuit
IR	Infrared
LLD	Leakage light detection
PCB	Printed circuit board
PWB	Printed wiring board
PTH	Plated-through hole
ROI	Region of interest
SNR	Signal-to-noise ratio
UV	Ultra violet

## *CHAPTER ONE*

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# INTRODUCTION

Printed circuit boards (PCBs) are the building blocks of almost all modern electronic systems. They provide a convenient way of mounting and interconnecting electronic components to form circuits and systems. The primary functions of the PCB are component support and circuit interconnection.

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

According to [THE62] the concept of the printed circuits has earlier origins than it is commonly supposed. A US patent dated 1903 describes ribbon cables formed *in situ* by electro-deposition. Between 1923-1929, a number of US patents were granted covering some of the techniques now still in use for printed circuit manufacture [THE62]. In 1936, P. Eisler was granted a British patent under the title "Printed Circuits" [EIS85]. Although Eisler's idea of etched foil circuits eventually became the most widely used method of producing circuits, the idea was not immediately successful [POL84]. Some of the early printed circuit patents granted to Eisler can be found in appendix 1-1.

During the Second World War the heavy demand for electronic devices stimulated the investigation into methods of producing circuits quickly and cheaply [POL84]. The first major application of the printed circuit concept occurred in 1945 when mass production of a United States military proximity fuse began at 5000 units a day. The circuit pattern was screen printed on a ceramic wafer using a conducting ink. The ink consisted of a binding agent, a solvent and fine silver powder. The printed ceramic plate was then heated to 500-800 °C, driving off the solvent and leaving the silver fused to the ceramic surface. The silver thus formed an excellent solid conductor and was well adhered to the ceramic base plate [THE62].

The success of the proximity fuse stimulated the launch of the printed circuit industry after the war. By the middle of the 1950s, printed circuits were being used in consumer products as well as military and industrial equipment [POL84]. Since then, the basic elements making up a PCB have remained unchanged. These are the base and the conductors. The base is a thin insulating material supporting all the conductors and electronic components. The conductors are customised patterns of thin metal strips, usually copper, firmly bonded to the base to form a laminate.

A PCB provides the necessary interconnections for the mounted components, it is also referred to as a printed wiring board (PWB) [LEO81]. By shaping the conductor patterns appropriately, it is possible to incorporate passive components such as small

inductors, small capacitors and resistors directly on the board. In this case it is always called a printed circuit board because the functional circuitry is also printed [HAI91]. To avoid confusion, this thesis uses only the term Printed Circuit Board (PCB) and PWB is treated as a synonym of PCB.

## **1.2 PRINTED CIRCUIT BOARD MANUFACTURERS**

According to [TYL94], up to 60 percent of the PCB manufacturers world wide are in the prototype and small batch sector. They provide services “where price is less of an issue and customers are prepared to pay for things in a hurry” and that these small companies generally “enjoy much higher profit margins than their large competitors”. It has been estimated that the small batch sector represents 10 percent of the entire PCB market. On the contrary, 50 percent of the total PCB output is produced by only 7 percent of the manufacturers [TYL94].

In a case study report prepared for the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology, McNaughton [MNA92] suggests that the main problem faced by the New Zealand electronics industry is a matter of scale when adapting overseas technology to New Zealand needs. In coping with New Zealand’s small production runs, specialised technology has to be developed to counter the scale problems.

### **1.2.1 Example of a Small Batch Production Facility**

The Department of Production Technology at Massey University has established a manufacturing pilot plant (MPP) for electronic products. The plant is capable of PCB design, bare board production and component assembly. As stated in [NIL91], one of the many aims of the MPP is “to focus on the technology and management of a strategic New Zealand industry”. To be of New Zealand relevance, the MPP “is a low cost process capable of short runs and rapid response”.

The level of technology involved is a double-sided PTH capability. Output volume has been designed at up to fifty panels (each 305 x 406 mm or 12 x 16 inches) a day. Various features of the MPP are described in [NIL91].

## 1.2.2 Competition Strategy of Small Batch Manufacturers

Tyler [TYL94] identifies four key investment targets that are becoming essential for contemporary PCB manufacturers to survive in competition. These are:

- Yield improvement
- Reduction of labour cost
- Fine line and small hole technology
- Guaranteeing product quality in the field.

It has been estimated that typical investment in response to such demands would require US \$0.3-0.5 million. Drilling and visual inspection systems are the two top areas of spending [TYL94].

Unlike major PCB manufacturers that can afford to stay ahead in technology and equipment, the small batch manufacturers' competitive strategy is to remain profitable on a low capital base. For example, commercial machine vision systems are designed for high volume inspections and require heavy capital investments (minimum US \$ 0.3 million) [TYL94]. The small batch manufacturers will find this level of spending prohibitive. Most importantly, such systems fail to match the needs of small scale production. This is a "matter of scale" problem no different to that as described in the McNaughton report (section 1.2). This helps to explain why in small scale production human visual inspection dominates.

## 1.2.3 Meeting the Needs of the Small Batch Manufacturers

Installation of suitable low cost PCB inspection systems could help the small batch competitors to achieve three goals:

- improved yield
- reduced labour cost
- better quality of the product.

A higher customer confidence and higher yield will combine to create a potential of increased profits. Here, low cost inspection systems constitute a significant investment advantage for the small manufacturers. This is due to:

- A low level of injected capital generates relatively high return
- Minimal increase in sales is required to adequately cover the injected capital
- Overall capital level remains low to retain profitability.

Such an investment strategy therefore falls in line with the low capital base strategy of the small batch manufacturers. It can be anticipated that low cost inspection systems, though less sophisticated than their expensive counterparts, would meet the needs of most small batch PCB competitors.

### **1.3 OBJECTIVE, SCOPE AND RELEVANCE OF THIS RESEARCH**

#### **1.3.1 Main Objective**

The main objective of this research was to explore and develop non-destructive methods for PTH inspection. These methods are relevant to small batch PCB production such as the facility in the Department of Production Technology at Massey University.

#### **1.3.2 Scope**

This research covers only double-sided PCBs with PTHs. Work has been focused on low cost solutions only. The PCB manufacturing process described in this thesis is based on the pilot plant facilities in the Department of Production Technology at Massey University. Although some of the work involved may be extended to cover certain categories of multilayer boards, such tests have not been conducted.

### 1.3.3 Relevance

The low cost approach towards non-destructive PTH inspection is targeted at providing technology support to the prototype and small batch sector of PCB manufacturers. Such a strong orientation towards serving the small business sector is relevant to the New Zealand industry.

## 1.4 LIST OF CONFERENCE PAPERS PUBLISHED

The following conference papers have been published in connection with the work described in this thesis:

1. K.C.Mak, R.M.Hodgson, R.F.Browne, R.R.Nilson, 'Image processing techniques for non-destructive testing of printed circuit boards'. *Proc. 2nd New Zealand Conference on Image Vision & Computing*, Palmerston North, August 1994, pp.2.5.1-2.5.5.
2. K.C.Mak, R.M.Hodgson, R.F.Browne, R.R.Nilson, 'Image analysis of copper plated surface - towards non-destructive inspection of plated through holes in printed circuit boards'. *Proc. Inaugural New Zealand Postgraduate Conference for Engineering & Technology Students*, Palmerston North, August 1994, pp.277-281.
3. K.C.Mak, 'Identifying defective through-hole plating in printed circuit boards using the leakage light detection method'. *Proc. 2nd New Zealand Postgraduate Conference for Engineering & Technology Students*, Auckland, August & September 1995, pp.195-200.

## 1.5 ORGANISATION OF THIS THESIS

A literature review on PCB manufacture and inspection is presented in chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 starts with a description of double-sided bare board manufacturing. The

key processes of PTH production are then examined. Chapter 3 describes the status of PCB inspection, focussing on the conventional method of testing PTHs. The need to develop non-destructive inspection methods for PTHs is identified.

The use of image processing techniques to discriminate between copper-plated and unplated surfaces is reported in chapter 4. The potential requirements and implications of applying these techniques to assess the through-hole plating quality are then discussed.

Chapter 5 examines alternative schemes for non-destructive inspection of PTHs and highlights the potential use of visible light as a penetrant for surface flaw detection.

Following the development in the previous chapter, chapter 6 focuses on the leakage light detection method and describes the development and performance of a low cost leakage light detection system for PTH inspection.

Chapter 7 presents the preliminary results on establishing the hardware and software requirements for a stuffed board component inspection system.

The important issues identified during this research are summarised in chapter 8. This chapter also discusses the inspection strategy and then examines the possible impact of a low cost inspection system on PCB manufacturers in the prototype and small batch sector. Chapter 9 concludes this thesis and recommends some directions for future work.