

CIRCUIT BOARD ETCHING

A step-by-step guide to making project boards

WHILE PERFORATED PROJECT BOARDS, or perf boards, are relatively cheap and easily obtained, a circuit board etched for its particular usage will provide neater, more professional results. Projects with the circuitry foundation of an etched board will be less prone to vibration damages as well as have greater impact resistance—in all, an etched board provides sturdier construction and greater safeguards.

In addition to the quality of construction, in contrast to perf boards, etching lessens the chances of undesirable oscillations caused by crossed or jumpered output signal wires producing feedback in sensitive component elements. Also, electrical noise interference caused by spurious radiations in the circuit's environment are more easily suppressed as a result of the close proximity of ground and voltage supply leads. Decoupling capacitors can easily span supply and ground distribution lines with correct board layout.

Only the etching process will be discussed in this article. The actual circuit board layout should be considered carefully and fully in advance.

Materials. The materials required for board etching can be found in nearby electronic retail stores, and the supplies, once purchased, should last through a number of etchings. A list of the materials needed includes:

1. Copper Clad Board.
2. Etchant Solution.
3. Resist Pen.
4. Shallow Pan.
5. Heat Source.
6. Template.
7. Drill Bits.

1. Copper-Clad Board. For good results on initial etchings, use boards with copper coating on one side only. A little experience is best before attempting double-sided boards. As for board dimensions, any convenient thickness or size will do depending upon the individual project. Copper-clad boards can easily be cut to fit exact measure-

ments with a fine-toothed saw such as a hacksaw.

2. Etchant Solution. There is a variety of etchant solutions currently on the market, both in crystal form and already mixed. An inexpensive, pre-mixed solution of ferric chloride is good for a starter; it conveniently provides a uniform end product. Although the solution used during an etching (several boards may be etched at once) cannot be reused, the bottles of solution commercially available contain enough fluid for a number of board projects.

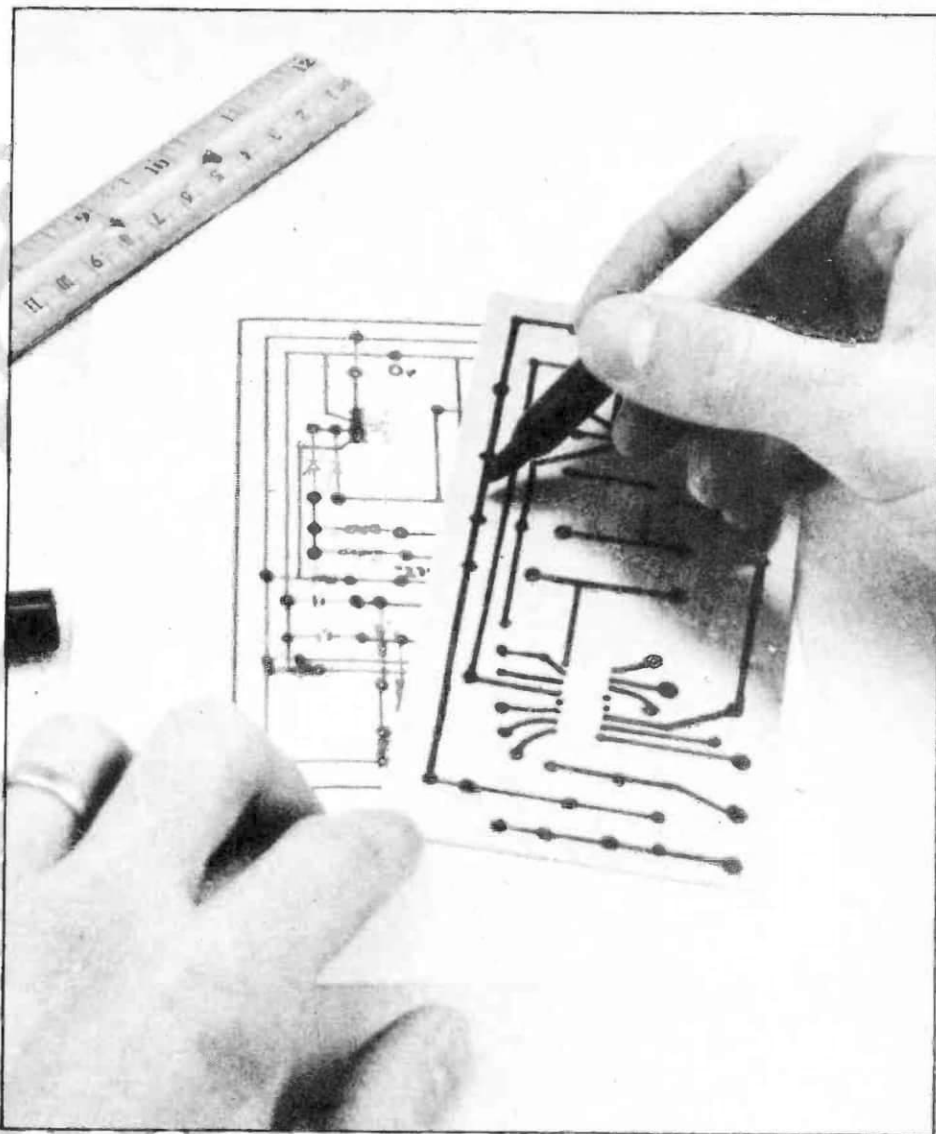
3. Resist Pen. Most electronic retail outlets have on stock pens specially designed for circuit board etching. However, most discount or five-and-dime stores sell the Sanfords Sharpie pen; or one like it, guaranteed to write on metal, plastic, etc. for one-quarter to one-half the price of the special resist pens. Both types give good service.

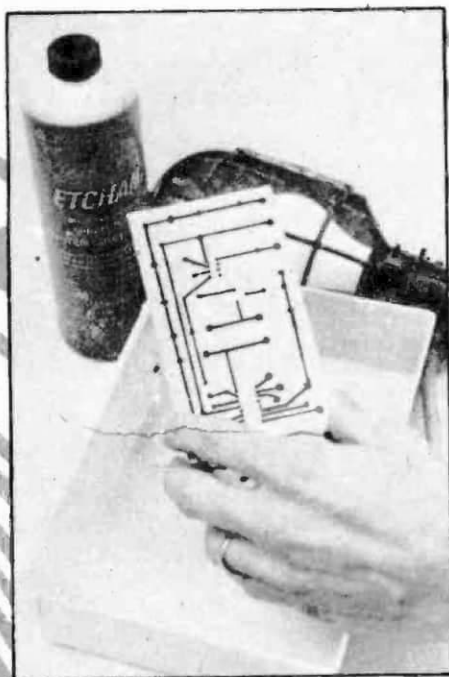
4. Shallow Pan. Do not use metal

pans to etch in, because the etchant will act on the pan metal. Instead, use a glass or plastic pan close to board size to conserve the etchant solution. An inexpensive set of plastic photographic developing trays would be a good investment for etching projects. Photographic trays are available in a variety of sizes.

5. Heat Source. A thermostatically controlled heat lamp would be the ideal heat source to be used during the etching process. However, an ordinary 60-watt light bulb suspended near the solution pan will accomplish the same thing for less expense. A droplight with a 60-watt bulb works well. Use a plastic photographic darkroom thermometer for temperature checking. In fact, with warm (60° F or above) air temperature, simply placing the plastic tray in warm water will provide the needed heat during the etching process.

6. Template. A template, or exact board layout, can be hand drawn. Often





This photo shows all of the vital items needed to etch custom-made circuit boards.

It is provided in electronic project plans.

7. Drill Bits. For board projects, get drill bits size 1/16-inch and 1/32-inch. Bits in these sizes can be found in most hardware or hobby stores.

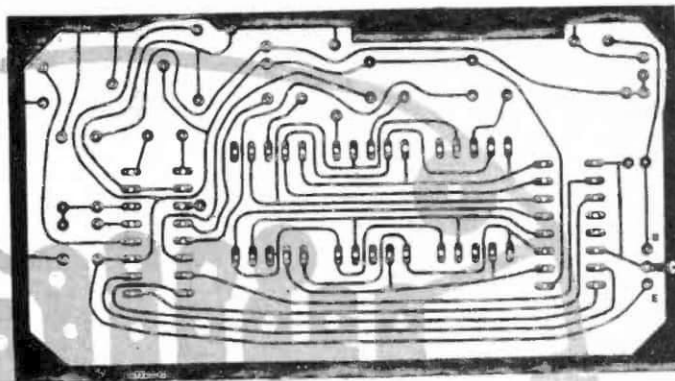
Marking The Board. A board layout, or template, provided with an electronic project may already be drawn in reverse. This is necessary, since circuit designs are drawn from the component side of the board, leaving the copper clad rear of the board an exact reverse.

If the design to be etched onto the circuit board is an original hand drawn layout, though, a reversed drawing can be easily accomplished by placing a carbon ink side up beneath the drawing and retracing the lines of the layout topside. When the carbon is removed, an exact reverse remains on the back of the original drawing. This carbon reverse is the template for etching. Before transferring the template drawing to the copper clad board, lightly rub the copper with a steel wool pad, then rinse and dry. Cleaning the board in this way permits the resist ink to adhere better.

Taking the template, punch small holes in the paper at each connection point. Place the template over the copper and use the resist pen to mark each connection point through the holes. Remove the template. If the circuit is simple, draw the rest of the template drawing onto the board. If lines are complicated, use a ruler as straightedge.

To get the most accurate results using

Some practice is needed to etch involved circuit boards like this one, but even a board of this complexity is within reach of hobbyist who is willing to learn etching.



the resist pen, store the pen with its tip down for several hours prior to use. When drawing on the copper, use long smooth lines and stop marking only at connecting points, otherwise there will be fine lines in the resist ink that will cause hairline cracks in the finished product. Do not back-up while marking or retrace lines for best results. Wide lines can be drawn by using the side of the pen point. Two lines drawn side by side can produce a wide area, but generally the end product is better using one mark. When mistakes occur, erase with a pencil eraser. Store the resist pen point down to prevent the point from drying between usages.

Etching. The etchant itself is an acid and therefore handle the solution with care. Take the same precautions necessary when handling any acid. Do not store the fluid where it is accessible to children. If during the etching process the solution splashes into the eyes, flush the affected area with water immediately and see a physician. Avoid body contact with the fluid and wash well if the etchant touches skin.

Pour only enough etchant needed to cover the resist marked board to a depth of 1/8-inch or slightly greater into the shallow tray. Use the etchant solution in a well ventilated room, and avoid breathing the fumes. Place the heatlamp or light bulb near the solution to raise the fluid temperature to approximately 100°F—the exact degree of temperature is not critical. Carefully slide the board into the etchant, copper side up. Gently agitate the solution every few minutes. By using the proper temperature of near 100°F, the etching should be completed within 15 minutes or so. Keep a close eye on the board and remove immediately upon completion of the etching. Tilt the pan carefully to one side to determine if all unwanted copper is gone.

The etching process can be undertaken with success using no heat source if the etchant solution temperature is above 60°F. The process takes approximately one hour with no applied heat,

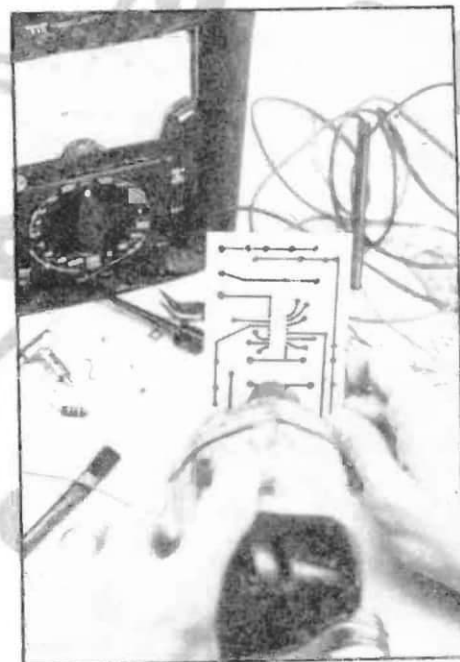
but the results are not as certain.

Finishing The Board. After the etching process has been completed, pour off the solution and rinse the board well under running water. Do not pour the used solution back into the solution bottle with unused etchant—this contaminates the entire contents of the bottle. To remove the resist ink, gently rub with a steel wool pad. Rinse, then dry the etched board.

Drill holes for connection wires with a 1/16-inch drill bit. For transistor or other component leads, use a bit size of 1/32-inch. To use these tiny bits in an ordinary hand drill, wrap the bit shank with masking tape before inserting it into the drill.

During etching, hairline cracks may form in critical paths on the board. Repair these cracks with solder before attaching components to the board.

The etched circuit board is now ready for whatever project you have in mind.



The final step is drilling holes to mount components. Use a 1/16- or 1/32-inch bit.