

## British Clay Tobacco Pipes

The Museum holds a nationally important collection relating to the clay tobacco pipe industry in Manchester. From 1968, John Pollock & Company of Manchester was the last commercial clay tobacco pipe firm in Britain. The Pollock factory closed in 1990. The Museum's collection includes tools and equipment used at the Pollock factory, left-over stock and a small group of company records, including order books and accounts ledgers.

The idea of clay tobacco pipes was probably adopted from the native Americans. In Britain, pipe-making began soon after the introduction of tobacco from North America in the mid-sixteenth century. Smoking, or 'tobacco drinking' as it was known, was believed to bring medicinal benefits. Writing his *Great Chronologie* in 1573, William Harrison noted that: 'In these daies the taking-in of the Indian herbe called 'Tobaco' by an instrument formed like a little ladell, whereby it passeth from the mouth into the hed and stomach, is gretlie taken up and used in England, against Rewmes and some other diseases engenderd in the longes and inward partes and not without effect.'

### Pipe-making

The craft of making clay tobacco pipes changed very little after the two-piece mould came into use in around 1600. A fine, white clay called china clay or kaolin is used for pipe-making. It is mainly found in South West England. Clay was quarried in large lumps, containing stones and other impurities. At the pipe factory, these large lumps would be divided into smaller pieces, washed to remove impurities and dried. When china clay became available in powdered form, pipe makers could just mix the powder with sufficient water. Beating the clean clay with a heavy iron bar removed any air.

After the clay had been kneaded, 'rollers', often women and children, would roll small pieces of clay into rough pipe shapes. Batches of a dozen rolls were passed to the moulders, usually men. The moulders pierced the stem with a fine metal rod called a moulder's wire and placed the rolls into moulds. Cast iron was used for the moulds from about 1750. One half of the mould had pins that fitted into corresponding holes in the other half. The filled mould would be placed in a gin-press, a vice-like bench tool with a

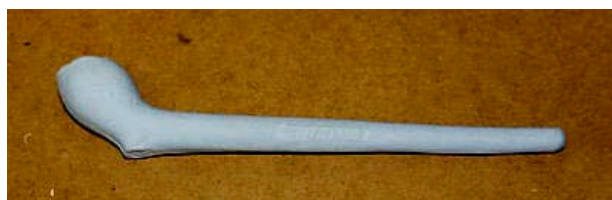


Saggar.

handle controlling the stopper that formed the hollow in the pipe bowl. The moulder would then trim excess clay from the rim and the mould joins before removing the wire. Pipes would be laid on a rack to dry before firing in a kiln. From the early nineteenth century, a fireproof vessel called a saggar was used to hold the pipes during firing. The firing process took about three days as the temperature had to be gradually raised to 900°C (1600°F). Finally, the mouthpiece was sealed with glaze or a mixture of soap, wax and gum to prevent the pipe from sticking to the lips.

## Pipe shapes and styles

The clay tobacco pipe acquired its standard form with a stem of 10 to 15 cm (4 to 6 in.) in length in the late sixteenth century. The earliest pipes had very small bowls because tobacco was an expensive luxury. Early pipes can also be recognised by their thicker stems. Over time, the basic form evolved to take on a variety of sizes and designs. The size of the bowl became bigger as the price of tobacco dropped. Increased skills, changing habits and shifting fashions influenced shape and style. The fashion for very long pipes began in the mid-eighteenth century when stems reached 45 to 60 cm (18 to 24 in.). These pipes were known as 'aldermans' or 'straws'. They were intended to be smoked at leisure, with the stem supported in the hand. From about 1850, even longer pipes (90 cm) were available. These 'yard of clay' pipes gained the name 'churchwardens'. However, manual workers preferred short 'cutty' pipes that could be held in the mouth while working.



Elizabethan-style clay tobacco pipe.

As craft skills of pipe makers developed in the nineteenth century, pipes with ornate decoration appeared. 'Fancy' pipes had decorated bowls, and sometimes stems, featuring designs such as sporting scenes, trees and plants, and patriotic emblems. Designs such as the 'Eagle's Claw' (clutching an egg) and the 'Hand and Flagon' had a general appeal, while those such as the 'Harp and Shamrock' had a more specific appeal. Clay pipe makers were also conscious of competition from other types of pipes. Other materials used for pipes include wood, meerschaum (a hard mineral), calabash (the shell of a tropical gourd) and briar (the root of the heath shrub). Sculpted meerschaum pipes were countered by clay 'character' pipes, with bowls moulded in the shape of human heads. Popular characters included kings and queens, politicians, military heroes and writers. Some characters were generalised - for example, 'The Motoring Lady' and 'The Jockey'. Glazed finishes, particularly in the honey to dark brown colour range, could be used to disguise the white clay. The clay pipe manufacturers also imitated the rougher textures of briar and calabash.

## The death of the industry

Apart from John Pollock & Company, other long-lived clay tobacco pipe firms included Henry Leigh & Company (1840-1932) of Portchester, Hampshire, and Charles Crop & Sons (1856-1924) of London. Firms went out of business in the early twentieth century because pipe-smoking was in decline owing to the increasing popularity of cigarettes. By the late twentieth century, tobacco use as a whole had become less socially acceptable, hence the virtual disappearance of the clay tobacco pipe industry.

### *For more information:*

- Read* Ayto, Eric G. *Clay Tobacco Pipes*. Princes Risborough, UK: Shire Publications Ltd, 1999.
- Visit* Maude, Keith. 'Mr. Pollock's Pipe Factory', in *Popular Archaeology* (July 1986).  
Ironbridge Gorge Museum, where the Broseley Pipeworks of William Southorn & Company is preserved as a working museum.