Hands On Learning
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GEORGIAN HOME LIFE H10/C

Tinderbox

It was only in 1827, that John Walker, English chemist and apothecary living at Stockton-on-Tees, discovered that if he coated the end of a stick with certain chemicals and let them dry, he could start a fire by striking the stick anywhere. These were the first friction matches. Before that date, if you needed a light, you would use a tinderbox like this.



This example is made of tin plate. The box was used to hold combustible material, often rags or scorched linen, wood chips or dried moss. Such material was the tinder which, with the help of the striker and flint-stone, would be used to create a flame.

To do this the striker was held by inserting as many fingers as possible into the space between the striker's handle and the strike-plate. The flint-stone was held firmly in the other hand, the striker was then swept vigorously downwards across an edge of the stone. With a good piece of flint it was possible to get a spark, although it was often quite difficult to get it to land in the box. If you look closely you can see that at some point in the past the strike-plate has been snapped in half, so it is not a good idea to use this example to practise with!

With a bit of luck, the spark would drop into the box and the tinder would begin to smoulder. It could then be blown on to produce a small flame. A wooden or paper spill could be lit from this flame and used to light a candle, or the fire, or whatever task you needed a flame for. The circular plate, with the broken handle, is not a lid and was never intended to fit tightly over the box. It is a snuffer and it would be dropped onto the smouldering tinder to put it out once a flame was no longer needed.

At first it is good fun to light a fire in this way but, if you are a housemaid, and you have to try and raise a flame every morning in the cold and darkness before dawn then the novelty soon wears off!

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Blue Jar



It is possible that this jar was made for use in an apothecary's shop - a chemist's, as we would term it today. Lined up along a shelf, with cloth covers tied around the rims, the apothecary could slip his hands between the tightly stacked jars, and lift down the one needed to prepare a prescription. Such jars were used by apothecaries to store dense syrupy substances, including fruit pulp and preserves, potions, lotions, dried medicinal drugs, and herbs, as well as cosmetics and perfumes. Varnished hand-written paper labels were pasted onto the outside to identify the contents.

Table Knife

Knives have been used as weapons, tools, and eating utensils since prehistoric times. However, it is only recently that knives have been designed specifically for table use. Because hosts did not provide cutlery for their guests during the Middle Ages in Europe, most people carried their own knives, which were narrow, with sharply pointed ends which were used to spear food. However, once forks began to gain popular acceptance, there was no longer any need for a pointed tip at the end of a dinner knife. In 1669, King Louis XIV of France decreed all pointed knives on the street or the dinner table illegal, and he had all knife points ground down in order to reduce violence.

The fashion took longer to reach England, but by the eighteenth century blunt-ended table knives were increasingly common. Cutlers began to make the blunt ends of knives wider and rounder so that any food which fell between the two prongs of a fork could be piled on the knife. Many knives, like this example, were designed with a blade which curved backward to make it easier to get food into the mouth. Such a backward curve is a good sign that the knife was made in the eighteenth century. This example has a maker's touchmark - a number 2, above a cross - which was required by law. Expensive knives often had a porcelain handle, but this wooden handle indicates it was used in slightly less exalted circles. The wire which has been crudely wound around the handle to correct a loose blade suggests that it had a long working life.



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Mary Eaton's Sampler

The term sampler comes from the Latin exemplum meaning 'an example to be followed, a pattern, a model or example'. The first known dated English sampler was made in 1598.

Samplers taught a child (usually a girl, but sometimes a boy) basic embroidery techniques - decorative motifs, the alphabet and numbers. The letters and numbers learned while embroidering a marking sampler were especially useful, since it was important that any homemaker keep track of her linens, some of her most valuable household goods. This was accomplished by marking them, usually in a cross stitch, with her initials and a number.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries samplers tended to be long and thin. They were often random in design with different patterns and techniques being tried out, rather like someone practising different handwriting styles as they worked their way down a page.

In the eighteenth century samplers increasingly became rectangular, with decorative borders. They often included alphabets, and motifs such as animals, flowers and houses, and they usually also contained some sort of verse. When finished this kind of sampler could be hung by proud parents on the parlour wall.

Samplers of the size of this example were often made as a school exercise, a possibility confirmed by the motto which Mary Eaton has carefully embroidered in red: 'A Diligent Scholar is an Ornament to a School'. Hopefully Mary got good marks for her neat effort!



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Horn Beaker



Horn was used by the Romans and Anglo-Saxons to make cups, spoons and other domestic items. The gelatine in animal horns makes it soft and easy to cut when heated. The horn can be softened in boiling water, flattened, separated into sheets and then formed into the desired shape. Beakers made of horn had the advantage of being light, washable, and inexpensive. Decorative scenes and patterns were sometimes scratched onto the surface using a hot needle. Horn beakers, like this plain example, were made in large numbers in the eighteenth century through to the second half of the nineteenth century.

Wig Curler



Wigs were commonly worn by men in the eighteenth century not because they were bald (though many probably were!), but because it was fashionable. By the first quarter of the eighteenth century a great variety of wigs of different fashions were on sale - full bobs, miniature bobs, naturels, Grecian flys and curly rays. When not in use the wig was kept on a stand and the curls were maintained by using a curler such as this. The hair was damped and wound round the curler together with a layer of paper. These cylinders varied in size according to the size of curls desired. The damp, curled hair was heated in an oven until the pattern was set. The curlers were made from fired pipe clay and were rounded at each end and were thinner in the middle to help keep the hair in place. It is thought that wig curlers were often made by pipe makers, although no proof of this has yet been found.

Comb



For those who retained their hair a comb was always useful! This style of comb was used in the Roman period, then by the Anglo-Saxons, and in every period since, including the eighteenth century. It is still used today, if only to comb out nits.

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Fragment of a Woman's Dress

Throughout the eighteenth century dress shapes changed regularly, as fashion has in all periods. Perhaps the most characteristic dress-type was the mantua. Originally a kind of loose gown, it later became an overgown, open at the front to display an underdress which was supported by side hoops. At the eighteenth century court, the hoops developed to an absurd size, extending several feet to each side, as if the wearer had an ironing board hidden under her skirts. It remained a court style of dress long after the fashions moved on.

Wealth and status were displayed not only by wearing the latest style, but also by the quality of the cloth and the amount of hand-stitching used to decorate it. This fragment shows how lavish the stitching could be. Look carefully at how the gradations of colour in each flower and leaf have been created by tiny, subtle stitching. It must have taken hours to create this small section alone. Both the cloth and thread are probably silk. The threads have been dyed a variety of bright colours and have retained their richness. Careful examination also reveals a liberal use of gold thread and, in some of the flowers, a use of thin strips of metal, probably silver. These silver strips have tarnished, but originally the dress must have glittered in the candlelight.

In the eighteenth century many of the finest dress makers in England were Huguenots - Calvinist refugees from Roman Catholic persecution in France - and this dress fragment is worthy of some of their workshops which flourished in Spitalfields, London, and other provincial towns at this time.

