Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SMOKING H153

We all now know that smoking is very bad for your health, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries smoking was considered a harmless and pleasurable pastime.





It was during the Elizabethan era that tobacco first came to Britain. European explorers discovered the plant (pictured on the left) in South America, where it had been cultivated since 6000 BC. At first it wasn't popular at all, as you can see from the account below, written by King James I in 1604:

[smoking is] a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.

You might think that anti-smoking campaigns are a new thing, but as you can see, they started as soon as tobacco was introduced to this country!

Despite this early warning, smoking grew in popularity and by the eighteenth century it was commonplace. By the late nineteenth century the most popular way to smoke was to roll tobacco in paper to form a cigarette. Developments during the Industrial Revolution meant that machines were invented that could produce 200 cigarettes a minute. Today they can produce 9000 in the same amount of time. During the early twentieth century cigarettes were even promoted as being good for you, as you can see from some of the advertising slogans below:

AND NOW - CHESTERFIELD FIRST TO GIVE YOU SCIENTIFIC FACTS IN SUPPORT OF SMOKING.
Chesterfield: 1950s

NEW MIRACLE MINT IN JULEPS FRESHENS THE MOUTH AT EVERY PUFF. EVEN IF YOU CHAIN-SMOKE, YOUR MOUTH FEELS CLEAN, SPARKLING ALL DAY LONG!
Juleps: 1940s

SO MILD! YOU CAN SMOKE ALL YOU WANT!
ATHLETES SAY- "CAMELS DON'T GET YOUR WIND!"
Camels: 1930s

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During the second half of the twentieth century scientists started to carry out research into the negative health effects of smoking. The results were shocking. Smoking became a less popular habit from then on. People also realised that the tobacco industry was trying to mislead them by making adverts that ignored serious health warnings and encouraged smoking. They tried to portray smoking as fashionable and attractive, even though the law stated that a health warning must be printed on the actual packet. Here are some slogans used by tobacco companies in the 1990s and a health warning on a cigarette packet from 2003:

WHY DO WE APPLY MASCARA AT 55 MPH?
BECAUSE WE CAN.
VIRGINIA SLIMS - IT'S A WOMAN THING.
Virginia Slims: 1997

"B KOOL!"
Kool: 1999



In this box you will find objects linked to smoking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Clay pipe

Nobody knows exactly when clay pipes were first used for smoking tobacco, but the idea was probably introduced in the sixteenth century when the plant was first brought to Britain. There have been many changes to the shape, size and design, but the basic structure and function has remained the same. A pipe has a long, thin stem with a round bowl on one end. The tobacco is packed into the bowl and lit with a match. The smoke draws up the stem towards the mouth. The pointed part that sticks out at the bottom is called the heel, and is designed to give the smoker a more secure grip.

This nineteenth century pipe is quite plain compared to some pipes of the Victorian period, which were elaborately decorated to illustrate events of the time or commemorate important dates.



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Pipe case



This brownish red leather case was used to protect a pipe when it was not being used. It is lined with a soft fabric, which has become discoloured with tobacco stains. It has strong hinges and a clasp, which needs to be pushed in to open the case. This case was made in the twentieth century by a company called Goudron, although the exact date is not known.

Cigar case



This beautiful leather case dates from about 1880 and was designed to hold cigars. There is a very interesting story connected to this particular case. It was presented to a man called Joseph Gardener who served as a police volunteer. He helped to restore order after a riot broke out in Reading in the early 1880s. The emblem on the outer case shows the Royal Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom, indicating that this is a very special and official gift.

Match case



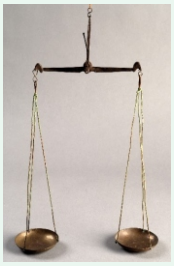
This lovely little silver match case was made in about 1912 and has swirls of leaf-like patterns engraved into both sides. On the bottom of the case you can see a strip of rough metal, which would have been used to strike the matches that were kept inside.

These cases are also known as vesta cases, named after 'Vesta', the Roman Goddess of fire and of the hearth. Many were produced between 1890 and 1920 as a result of the great surge in the popularity of smoking.

Opium scales



Opium is a drug made from the sap inside the seeds of a special type of poppy, shown here in the picture on the right. It can be smoked in a pipe, eaten or turned into a drink. At first it makes the user feel relaxed and happy, but once addicted the health is seriously affected. Users experience flu-like symptoms, depression, sickness, breathing problems and sometimes even death.



These small brass scales were used to measure the quantities of opium being bought and sold. They date from the nineteenth century when the opium trade was at its highest. At that time the British Empire controlled India, where opium poppies were grown. This was then taken to China and traded for tea, which could be taken back to Britain. Many Chinese people became addicted to the drug and many health and social problems arose. The Chinese Emperor made the drug illegal, which angered the British. Two wars followed from 1839 to 1842 and 1856 to 1860, both won by the British. This was bad news for China because the Chinese ports remained open to the opium trade.

The drug also became popular in Britain. It could be bought from chemists as it was said to aid some health problems and could also be purchased from the local grocer's for a penny. Opium was even an ingredient in children's remedies as it was said to keep them quiet and passive. During the second half of the nineteenth century people started to realise the negative effects of taking opium. By 1868 the first laws were passed to regulate the use of the drug and anti-drug groups were formed.

Today, opium is illegal in most countries around the world and so growth and production has reduced. However, the illegal drugs trade still continues and currently, Afghanistan is the largest grower of opium poppies.

In 2004 a new museum opened in Thailand illustrating the deadly history of opium. It has been visited by thousands of school children and adults, both from Thailand and from all over the world. The directors of the museum hope that it will help to warn people of the dangers of taking drugs and inspire them to make the right choices in life.

Tavern glass ashtray

This round, clear glass ashtray has an advertising slogan printed on the side from Simonds Beer, which was a brewery in the centre of Reading. The brewery was established in 1785 by William Blackall Simonds and grew steadily throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1872 the company was given a contract to supply beer to the British Army. Simonds Beer was taken over by another company called Courage in 1960.

The slogan printed on the side reads "hoppy says have a Tavern". Hoppy is a character in the shape of a hop leaf, which is one of the main ingredients of beer.

