Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NINETEENTH CENTURY RURAL LIFE H155

Replica Smock

The smock was the working overall of farm workers in southern England from the seventeenth century through to the late nineteenth century. It was the equivalent of the blue one-piece trouser-overalls often worn by factory and farm workers today. Like the modern overall the smock protected the clothes underneath from being damaged or dirtied while working on the farm. In the seventeenth century the smock was called a slop, in the eighteenth century a frock - only in the nineteenth century did smock become the preferred term.

Smocks seem to have begun simply as shirts which were worn loose. They were usually made of twill weave cotton, sometimes referred to as drabbet. They were cheap and easy to make, being stitched together from squares and rectangles cut from a single piece of cloth. They came in a variety of colours red, black, blue, green, as well as white. Their shape was achieved with gathering the cloth across the chest and back and on the sleeves. This technique - now known as smocking - gave the finished garment a certain elasticity that meant it was perfect for wearing over the top of one's normal clothes. Gradually, as well as being gathered, they became more elaborately embroidered. Flowers, leaves, shepherd's crooks, as well as intricate geometrical patterns can all be found. This fashion for elaborate embroidery reached a peak in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, by the end of the century, wearing a smock was becoming rare. Rather than being the proud symbol of a farm worker, they became thought of as lower-class and slightly ridiculous. Young men ceased to wear them and the First World War finished off the tradition.



Replica Neckerchief

The smock was often worn with a bright red neckerchief like this one just the thing to wipe sweat from one's brow after hours of toil! The photograph shows a young farm worker from Norfolk in 1902, wearing both smock and neckerchief.

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Ale Muller

We might think of having mulled wine to warm us in the winter, but no longer think of warming beer. Today beer is drunk cold, preferably ice cold. However, for most of its history it was served at room temperature and from the late Middle Ages through to the nineteenth century it was popular served piping hot. Hot beer was thought to be more healthy than cold. For example, in 1641 Henry Overton published a short pamphlet entitled a *Treatise of Warm Beer, wherein is declared by many reasons the beer so qualified is farre more wholesome then than that which is drunk cold*. Heating beer was also considered necessary because of the dominance of home brewed ale. Frequent use of substandard ingredients, combined with questionable brewing equipment and techniques, made most home brewed beer somewhat unpalatable. Adding spices and warming the beer increased its appeal. Perhaps the most famous mulled ale drink was called Lambswool. This was prepared by first roasting several apples until the skins burst. Strong, old ale was heated, into which nutmeg, ginger and sugar were mixed. Finally, the apples were immersed in the heated beer immediately before serving.

The pointed base of the muller allowed it to be pushed deep into the warm ashes and cinders of a fire. Some mullers are shaped like a boot. They look rather like an ordinary pan, but with a conical bit projecting from the side. Such a design allowed them to be stood on the hearth, with the projection pushed into the ashes. This sturdy tin muller was made by S. Crompton and Son, Ironmongers, 55 High Street, Lincoln. This business seems to have left few records, although Lincolnshire archives contains an apprenticeship indenture for George Crompton (perhaps the son of S. Crompton?) from 1893 and documents about their sign board dated 1898. The muller probably dates from around this period.



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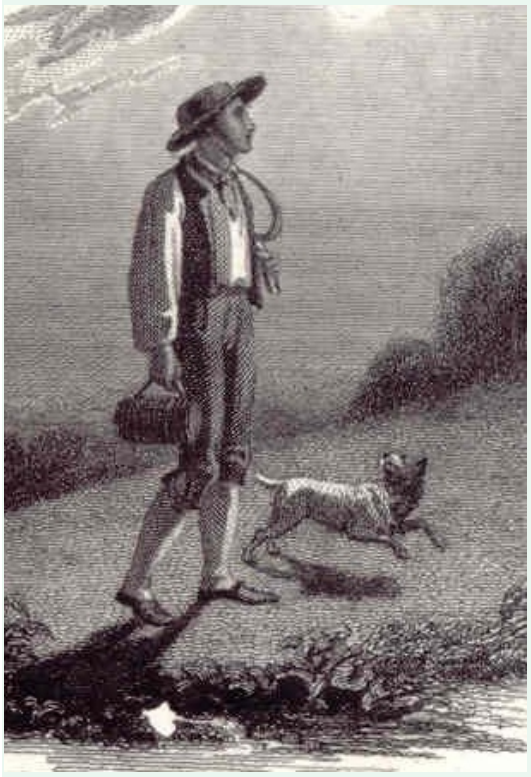
Beer or Cider Keg



Until the twentieth century beer, rather than water, was safer to drink. Water was often rather dirty and could carry infections. Farm workers might take a keg like this to work with them filled with beer to drink with their mid-day food. The beer drunk on such occasions - and by servants in general - was not very alcoholic. It is often referred to as small beer. The phrase 'small beer' has come to mean something weak or insignificant, but originally it was brewed in great quantities in large houses and farms to provide a safe drink for workers.



This keg was originally painted green and it is missing its bung. Interestingly the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading has an almost identical example which is painted green. It was used by a farm wagonner from Wales to hold cider and it used to hang on the harness of his team. It is believed to date from the 1880s. The example in this box may date from the same period.

Left: Nineteenth century illustration of a farm worker returning home after a hard day's work - note the beer keg which he is carrying with him.

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Horse Bit



Horses were still very much working animals on British farms up until the Second World War. They were used to plough, pull carts, turn mills and pumps and many other jobs. Some workers specialised in looking after the farm's horses. An extensive knowledge of folk-medicines and techniques for handling horses was handed on over generations of horsemen which has been lost since the coming of the tractor.

Whether a horse is part of a plough team or is to be ridden by an individual it will have to be fitted with a bridle if it is to be controlled. A bit is a piece of metal, attached to the bridle, which fits in the natural space between a horse's front cutting teeth and its back grinding teeth. Reins are attached to the outer ends of the bit and are held in the driver's hands. Reins are the means by which a horse rider or driver gives directional commands to the horse's head. Pulling on the reins can be used to steer or stop the horse. The sides of a horse's mouth are sensitive, so pulling on the reins pulls the bit, which then pulls the horse's head from side to side, which is how the horse is controlled. There are several different kinds of bit and if they are not fitted correctly they can damage the horse.

Cow or Sheep Bell



Both sheep and cows often had bells hung around their necks. Sheep, in particular, were left to graze over wide areas. This was the main form of agriculture on the Berkshire Downs until the Second War. Since then fertilizers have allowed farmers to grow corn on the hills, but until this changed the Downs echoed to the sound of sheep bleating and the clack of bells like this one. Also, farm workers often grazed a cow or sheep on the common land near to their house. Commons were sometimes quite extensive and, as on the Downs, animals could wander over a considerable distance. A bell around its neck helped the owner to locate it.

This is a typical example. It has been crudely but effectively made in a local blacksmith's shop. The tongue is made from a nail with its point bent round to attach it to the body. The double curve of the hanger is also typical. Bells were attached to the sheep by two straps of leather. These went around either side of the neck and were then joined together on the top of the neck by a wooden yoke. This was useful to grab hold of if the sheep didn't want to be caught!