Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FOOD AND DRINK H166

In this box you will find a collection of items associated with eating and drinking.

Replica medieval pot

This replica pot was made as an experiment to find out how pottery might have been produced in medieval times. It is probable that a pot like this would have been used to hold liquid as it has a lip on the rim for pouring.





It is very common for archaeologists to find pieces of pottery when they are excavating because it is very tough and survives better than other materials. We can gain a lot of information from even the smallest fragment of pottery, such as the date it was made, the type of raw materials used and the vessel it was originally part of. Then we can start to put together a picture of how the vessel might have been used and the daily lives of the people who might have owned it. We can also make replicas like this based on the fragments found to try to learn more about the techniques of pot making.



The pot in this box has been made using a wheel to help shape the clay, similar to how it would have been made in the Medieval Period. Some pots were made using a different technique where long thin rolls of clay (called coils), were stuck together with water and smoothed over to get rid of the joins. In the picture on the right you can see the rows of coils on top of each other being smoothed on the inside with the fingers. Whether using a wheel or coils, the pot was then fired in a kiln so that it became hard and strong. The pot in this box has a glaze inside, which helps to stop the contents from seeping into the clay. The pots would have been made in a workshop, which needed to be situated near to natural resources such as clay, sand, water and wood for fuelling the kiln.

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Pewter tankard



A tankard is a type of sturdy drinking vessel with a handle on the side. This one is made of pewter, which is a metal alloy of tin and copper or lead. It is a bright, shiny metal and was often referred to as 'poor man's silver'. Pewter was introduced to Britain by the Romans in the second century AD, but it wasn't until the Middle Ages that it became widely used to make the majority of household items, including candlesticks, plates, bowls and buttons. Pewter is still used today, but usually only for ornaments, because from the nineteenth century onwards mass-produced goods made of glass and china took its place in the kitchen and on our dinner tables.

Mortar



This brass mortar was used with a round-ended stick called a pestle to grind and mix ingredients. People still use this technique today, especially for preparing herbs and spices as it helps to release the flavours. Traditionally, pestle and mortars were used by a pharmacist to make medicines and you can see them used as a symbol on some pharmacy signs today. It is important that both the pestle and the mortar are made from hard materials so that small fragments don't break off and become mixed in with the ingredients. This was a common problem in the past when stone was used to make the pestle. Pieces of stone and dust would end up in the food and cause serious damage to the teeth.



Pestle and mortars are used all over the world for many different purposes. In the Middle East and North Africa minced meat and spices are mixed together with a large stone pestle and mortar to make a dish called kibbeh. In Mexico a basalt pestle and mortar is used to make guacamole, which is an avocado based paste, and in Asia a granite version is used to prepare spices for traditional dishes, as you can see in this picture.

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Sugar loaf cutters



In the eighteenth century sugar was bought in a cone shaped loaf rather than granulated or in lumps as we buy it today. Sugar was considered a luxury and the loaf was displayed like an ornament in the kitchens of the upper classes.

Cutters were needed to remove pieces of sugar from the loaf and then to cut them into smaller pieces as required, however none of this process was seen outside the kitchen. After the sugar was cut, it was served to guests in small decorative bowls with delicate tongs and teaspoons. As the cutters were purely functional they are usually plain, as you can see from the example in this box.

Pastry jaggers



This kitchen utensil was used to decorate the edge of pies and join the crusts together. The jagged wheel has a fluted edge and so cuts a pattern that looks like a wiggly line. The other end is like a pair of tweezers and has a crimping pattern to squash the edges of the piecrust together and seal it with a decorative pattern.

This pastry jagger probably dates from the first half of the nineteenth century, as we know that a manufacturer in Birmingham first advertised the pastry jagger with a tweezer handle at this time.

Leather cased drinking flask



This object is known as a hunt or saddle flask, as it was fastened to the straps of a saddle when people were making long journeys on horseback or going hunting. The thicker strap at the bottom of the case is designed to slot onto the girth of the saddle to prevent the flask from flapping around. Inside the leather case there is a strong, cylinder glass flask that narrows towards the bottom. This would have contained a strong alcoholic drink such as whiskey or brandy. This design was much safer than the rider carrying a flask attached to their own belt, which could jab into the ribs or cause a nasty injury if they fell off the horse.

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Child's drinking cup



This two-handled cup probably dates from the nineteenth century and has the children's nursery rhyme 'little Jack Horner' painted on the side. Cups like these were often given to Victorian children for christenings and birthdays. Some had a rhyme and a picture like this one, whereas some were designed to help educate the child and had the alphabet or numbers painted on the side. Some were given as presents for being good and had messages such as 'present for sewing well' or 'for a good child' written on them.

If you turn the cup over carefully you will see a stamp on the bottom belonging to a famous pottery company called Royal Doulton. The company was founded in 1815 by the Doulton family and given royal status by King Edward VII in 1901. Royal Doulton is still extremely popular today and can be seen in households in many different countries all over the world.

Ration book





During the Second World War, it was difficult for food to be imported and this led to shortages. Rationing was introduced to make sure everyone had a fair share of what was available - even the Royal family had to live by these strict rules! Ration books were full of coupons that were handed over at the till along with the payment in exchange for goods such as meat, butter, sugar, jam, tea, biscuits, eggs and dairy products. One of the few foods not rationed were fish and chips! The picture shows a shopkeeper cancelling the coupons in a ration book for the margarine, butter, bacon and other goods on the table.

Some people tried to buy extra food illegally on the black market, but it was very risky and they were often tricked into buying horsemeat instead of beef. Despite the lack of food, some of our best-loved dishes became popular during this time, such as apple crumble and carrot cake. Housewives wanted to try out new recipes that didn't take up too much of the weekly rations but still allowed the family to have a treat. The crumble was popular as it didn't use as much flour and butter as the pastry for a pie and was very simple to make, allowing time for other tasks. Carrot cake was popular because the carrots naturally sweetened the cake mixture without having to use too much precious sugar.