Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MILK SELLER H204



This figure is supposed to represent a nineteenth century milk seller. In the nineteenth century people in cities did not buy their milk from shops or markets, instead it was sold door to door by men, or more commonly women. These sellers carried a shoulder-yoke, from which hung a pair of wooden or metal containers, often capable of holding up to ten gallons (80 pints) of milk. Can you imagine what hard work it would be to carry so much weight around the streets?

The milk was supplied either by cows that people kept in their backyards, or by herds that were kept by cow keepers on the outskirts of towns or in the surrounding countryside. Later, trains sometimes brought in milk from further away, but to begin with this took time and the milk would sometimes go off before it reached its destination. As late as 1889, there were still nearly seven hundred licensed cow-houses in London.

Most of the milk brought was probably used for cooking, rather than drinking. Beer remained the most popular drink in the nineteenth century. Milk was sometimes mixed with water in order to make quantities go further. This was a concern, as if mixed with polluted water it could spread disease. An Act was eventually passed by the Government to make it illegal to sell milk mixed with water as milk.