Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

LAUNDERING H224





During the Victorian Era and into the early twentieth century, Monday was washday. Women got up especially early on Monday morning to heat enough water to fill the dolly tub - a large barrel made of wood or, later, galvanised steel (pictured on the right). The dirty laundry had to be sorted into piles, the dirtiest being left until the end. It took all morning to wash and rinse the clothes, with the water in the dolly tub being changed several times.



A dolly peg (pictured on the right) was used to move the clothes around inside the tub to aid cleaning. The handles at the top helped to get a good twisting action and the pegs at the bottom stirred the washing around. Housekeepers recommended that the dolly peg should be turned 100 times for each item of clothing!

Posser

A posser was sometimes used instead of a dolly peg. It was lifted up and down in the tub, forcing the water through the holes. The water was drawn through the washing and helped to remove any dirt. This posser is quite small and was probably intended for a sink or bowl, rather than a dolly tub.



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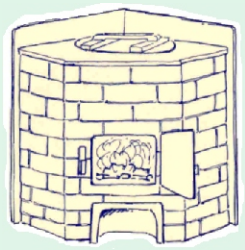
Dipper



The water was heated in the copper - a large cauldron-like vessel surrounded by bricks. The fire was made underneath it. (There is a drawing of a copper on the right). Clothes could be soaked in the copper and whenever water was needed for a job, it was scooped out with the dipper.



Soap, brush and washboard



Carbolic soap was used as a detergent, although it wasn't nearly as effective as modern washing powder. Badly soiled items had to be attacked with the washboard and scrubbed clean. A brush might also be used on a really heavy stain. The soap was bought in bars and grated into the water by hand. In 1900, packaged flakes arrived, which dissolved more easily in the water. There are some adverts for different brands of soap below.



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Clay pipe

Women were extremely busy on washday and didn't have time to play with their children. Instead, they gave them a clay pipe and a bowl of soapy water to blow bubbles with.



Tongs, blue bag and soda

Coloured items were removed from the dolly tub with large wooden tongs, whilst white items were left in and a dolly blue bag (sometimes called laundry blue) was added. This was a small muslin or flannel bag filled with a blue dye called ultramarine and baking soda. It covered any hint of yellow, giving the illusion that garments were brilliant white.



Soda could also be added to soften the water and keep the white laundry clear and bright.

Pegs

In the afternoon, clothes were put through the mangle to squeeze out the water. The mangle had two large rollers, which were turned manually using a handle on the side. Laundry was fed between the rollers to wring out as much water as possible. It was then pegged out to dry, either across the street or on wooden racks in front of the fire.



Mangling board



This beautifully carved wooden board was used to smooth sheets and other large items after the water had been squeezed out. The item was wound tightly around a wooden cylinder-shaped roller and the mangling board was passed backwards and forwards over the top.

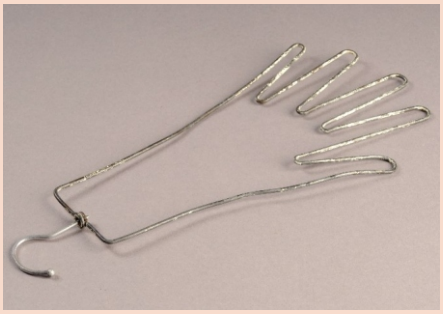
Mangling boards were first used in the sixteenth century. This one dates from 1786 and has been carefully decorated with carvings of flowers and swirls. There is a thistle stretching from one end to the other - it looks like it is growing up the centre of the board. The date and some initials have also been carved into the wood. Boards as decorative as this were probably never used. It is more likely that it was carved by a young man and given to his bride-to-be as a token of love. It may have been hung on the wall as a decoration. Carved mangling boards can also be found in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and the Netherlands. There are some examples in the pictures below.





Glove shape

Gloves were tight-fitting and made of materials such as cotton, silk and leather. After the gloves were washed they would become wrinkled and stiff and might shrink. This metal glove shape stretched the gloves as they dried, encouraging them to keep their shape.



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Flat Iron and trivet



Imagine how tiring it must have been to iron your clothing using this heavy object! Flat irons were used to remove creases from washed clothes by pressing down on the material, just like the modern electric iron does today.



Tuesday was ironing day. The iron was heated on the range and, when ready, lifted up carefully with a cloth wrapped around the handle. Households normally had two irons - one was left heating up on the range whilst the other was being used. The trivet was fitted onto the front of the range to stand the irons on.

Gas iron



The attractive green and black Clark's 'Fairy Prince' gas iron dates from the 1930s. It has a matching green stand. It made life much easier as the heat could be controlled and there was no need to have another iron heating up on the range.

The supply of gas was connected at the back and found its way to the 13 tiny spouts inside, where it could be ignited. Look inside and you will see them.

There were some drawbacks. The gas irons tended to give off a smell and sometimes fumes would escape, making a popping sound. This might sometimes singe the user or at least make them jump!

Starch



Shirt collars and sleeves were stiffened using starch, which was taken from potatoes or wheat. The starch was added to the cloth whilst it was being ironed, giving it a smooth, crisp feel. It also served a practical purpose. The dirt from a person's neck or wrists stuck to the starch rather than the material, making it easier to wash. The starch had to be replaced each time the clothes were washed.

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Goffering iron and stand



The end of this long stick was placed in the fire until very hot. It was then placed inside the stand and starched material was draped over the top. It was used to reshape bows and frills around the edges of material.

The goffering iron originally came from Italy and was also known as an Italian or tally iron.

Linen marking kit



Many better-off families sent their washing away to be washed or ironed. It had to be marked with a name or initials otherwise you might end up with someone else's clothes and sheets! This kit contains a stamp, ink and a pad. There are instructions for use inside the lid.

The picture on the right shows Mr Oliver and his staff at the Non Pareil laundry at Cliddesden, near Basingstoke. The photograph was taken in about 1890.



And at the end of an exhausting, physical day the evening meal had to be prepared!

For more information on washday, look at the online learning resources on Reading Museum Service's website.

Http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/onlinelearning/index.htm