Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

1930s to 1940s HOMELIFE H278

At the end of the 1930s Britain had a new king on the throne. As technology had advanced his coronation could be covered live around the country by radio for the first time.

The positive feeling of the 1930s was gone by the 1940s. The Second World War meant friends and family were away fighting in Europe. At home people faced restrictions on the amount of food they ate and material used. They had to make do with what they had. Despite the hardship a sense of unity existed as towns came together to help fight the war.

Biscuit barrel



A biscuit barrel keeps its contents fresh, although this one can only hold a small amount. There are no markings to show who made it but a shield has been attached to the front. Trophies often have engraved shields. Perhaps this biscuit barrel was originally presented as a prize.

In Reading, biscuits were made in a factory called Huntley & Palmers. Over 5,000 people worked here making it an important part of the town's history. It sold biscuits as far away as China, and Reading became known as 'the biscuit town'.

From 1942 to 1950 ingredients needed for production, such as sugar, were in short supply. Biscuits therefore became rationed and people were only allowed to buy a small number.

Hot water bottle

Hot water bottles are used to warm up a bed before going to sleep. The one on the right is made from metal. When used it would have been wrapped in a cloth. Without a cloth the hot metal would have burned those in the bed! Rubber is now used to make the bottles and is unlikely to burn people.



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Wall plaque



The name of the company that produced the brass plaque, 'Peerage', is marked on the back. They were formed in 1946 so we know the object was made after this date. It shows a wooden boat with a serpents head. A plaque such as this would have hung over a mantlepiece.

Brass ornaments were popular decorations for homes. They suited the style of the 1930s and 1940s for having a few, small modest items on display.



In the years before the war, Huntley & Palmers had designed a tin with a lid that doubled as a wall plaque. The tin on the right also has the image of a wooden ship with oars. Both have been created to look exciting and appealing. Do the boats look like any you have seen?

Tie press



A tie press is used to flatten creases and keep the tie smart. The screws are loosened and the neckwear is then placed between the two wooden boards. The screws are re-tightened to press down on the tie.

Those who were employed in industries such as coal mining would usually wear a tie only when going to church. The dirt and sweat of their job made it pointless to put one on. Managers or office workers, however, wore a tie daily. The tie was representative of a man's social standing and importance.



The pictures on the right show the contrast in menswear between those in industry and in the office.

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Pair of shoe trees



People tried to preserve their footwear with shoe trees. These maintained the shoe's shape ensuring it remained comfortable and lasted longer. They were designed to be placed in shoes made from material such as leather rather than casual trainers.



This particular tree is wooden. The front is smoothly shaped like the shoe and the spring keeps the correct length. Many moderns shoe trees are plastic. The pictures on the right show the two different types of shoe tree

Stud box

The horseshoe shaped object is called a stud box and held men's personal accessories.



Shirts worn at formal occasions, such as weddings, often came with a separate collar. The collar would be very stiff and attached to the shirt by two collar studs. These were placed through slits that resemble buttonholes. The small stubby one was put into the back and the taller one in the front.



The square cufflink usually came as a matching pair. Like the collar stud it was used to button together the shirt by fixing together the cuffs.

The small piece shaped like a lollypop stick is a collar stiffener. It went under the front of the collar to help keep its shape and remain rigid.

A tie clasp is a decorative piece that clipped the tie to the shirt, stopping it from flapping around in the wind!

The stud box and its contents would have been an important part of a gentleman's wardrobe.

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Matchbox cover



Bryant & May made matchsticks. This is one of the covers to their box of safety matches. The flower on the front is a symbol that customers could readily identify with the company.



Bryant & May had been the first company in Britain to use safety matches in 1855. Before safety matches, the match head was made from a substance called white phosphorous. This was a horrible chemical and many workers developed the disease phossy jaw, a form of bone cancer. Despite 1,400 women workers striking in 1888 over conditions it was not until 1901 that the company stopped using white phosphorous.



In the 1940s smoking was still seen as a pleasurable pastime. The *Radio Times* magazine in the box has adverts for cigarette brands. One is shown here emphasising how the cigarette was 'kind to my lips... so smooth to my throat'! It was in the later half of the twentieth century that it became clear the damage smoking could do to people's health.

Embroidered mat



In the nineteenth century an increase in the use of machinery brought about a decline in embroidery. The emphasis was on rapid mass production rather than individual creativity.



Its popularity began to return before the Second World War as women's magazines started to include patterns. These were a set of instructions to follow, which would produce a piece of clothing or decorations for the home such as this mat.

During the Second World War this pastime became an important skill. Shortages of supplies forced families to repair clothing rather than buy new ones. The leaflet on the right shows that even the armed forces were encouraged to knit. Notice how the man and woman are modelling scarves, jumpers and mittens.

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Blackout curtain



This curtain would have been hung during the Second World War. It covered the window at night to keep light from being visible.

During the war Britain suffered heavy bombing, in an attack called the Blitz. This was a concentrated effort to bomb the country into submission. Blackouts were used to prevent the German airplanes seeing any lights. A light could give an indication to the pilot where there was a town or city - making an easier target.

The blackout curtain was very important. ARP (air raid precaution) wardens would patrol the streets to make sure no light was shown. If a household did not close its curtains they would be fined. It was not only homes - even cars had to tape up their headlights, except for a small slit. People were often knocked down by the cars and fell down steps. They could not see where they were going at night! After a few months the rules had to be relaxed because of the number of accidents.

Rafmain souvenir booklet



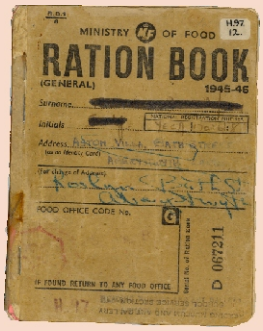
This souvenir booklet was produced to mark Christmas and New Year 1944-1945. Britain was still at war but victory was in sight.

Many people contributed to the war without fighting at the front. This booklet was produced by an RAF base for its own workers. It congratulates and thanks the staff for their role in Britain's war effort. The base's staff would provide lots of support, including training for pilots and arranging the logistics. Logistics included moving troops and ensuring supplies got to the correct RAF base. This had to be done to ensure the pilots could fly their missions successfully.

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Ration book



Rationing was introduced in 1940 to control supplies of food. German submarines had started a blockade by sinking Allied ships. This made it hard for Britain to import food. With less food coming into the country people were concerned that they would be starved into losing the war.

Each person over five had their own ration book. These were hugely important to the families. This particular booklet shows the rationing of meat, eggs, fat, cheese, bacon and sugar. Once the customer had their week's ration a cross was placed in the box. They were then unable to get any more until the following week. Even with rationing, shopkeepers sometimes ran out of supplies and could not provide the food.

A famous poster campaign encouraged Britons to 'Dig for Victory'. Unlike meats and cheeses, vegetables were not rationed. Many families grew their own vegetables as a way of providing more food. The government sent out instruction leaflets on growing fruit and vegetables. There was even a Dig for Victory anthem!



Dig! Dig! Dig! And your muscles will grow big
Keep on pushing the spade
Don't mind the worms
Just ignore the squirms
And when your back aches laugh with glee
And keep on diggin'
Till we give our foes a Wiggin'
Dig! Dig! Dig! To Victory!

Music Sheet

This is the single cover for the popular American singer, Bing Crosby. Inside are the musical notes and words that make up one of his songs. He was particularly influential in the 1930s and 1940s. Crosby's style of music was known as crooning with a singer accompanied by an orchestra.



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Radio Times



The *Radio Times* was a guide to the week's entertainment, available from the BBC. Today, the *Radio Times* still exists and shows the television as well as radio schedule. In 1937, few people had televisions but most listened to the radio.

This particular edition is very important. It celebrated the coronation of King George VI. He had succeeded to the throne when his older brother, Edward VIII abdicated. Edward had been forced to give up the throne by the government because of his relationship with Wallis Simpson, a twice divorced American. In 1930s Britain, divorce was still seen as socially unacceptable. The government at the time felt that the British people would not accept a divorced American as their queen. Edward VIII was left to choose between remaining king or marrying. He chose to marry Wallis Simpson and abdicated, leaving the crown to pass to his younger brother.

Reading the magazine you can sense the excitement of the ceremony. This was the first live radio coverage of a coronation. For those living outside London it would be the first time they would have been able to hear a coronation as it happened.

National Savings card



This particular card was a Christmas present. The decorations are surrounding flags of countries that fought alongside Britain in the Second World War. National Savings cards were often sent to friends and family on special occasions.

During the war the government sought to raise money through National Savings. By appealing to patriotism the public was encouraged to lend the country money. This was done by exchanging money for stamps that were then stuck inside the card. It acted as a record of the amount of money lent by the cardholder, similar to a savings book. It was a means of supporting the troops for those unable to fight. Communities formed National Savings Committees, which joined together to save enough money to buy a Spitfire or tank.

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Four photographs



After the Second World War photography became more accessible. Cameras became easier to work, smaller to hold and produced pictures of quality at cheap prices.

These are a selection of photos from the 1930s and 1940s. They show how men and women dressed. As today, pictures of family occasions were common. This group includes a family on holiday and professionally taken pictures. Photographs remind owners of happy times and those close to them. When do you have pictures taken?

You can see why the other objects in the box were important through the smart appearance of those pictured. The grandfather posing in the family holiday snap still has on his shirt, tie and smart shoes despite being at the beach. Even in a relaxed moment he is wearing formal clothing! Professional photographers were also popular. Before photography only the wealthy could afford to have their portrait painted by an artist. The camera allowed many families to have a happy image they could keep. The people in these photos are dressed up in their best clothes. Often these pictures would be one of the few items on display in their house.