Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

1930s TO 1940s CHILDHOOD H280

The positive mood that had existed in 1930s Britain disappeared in the early 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 clothing material used. They had to make do with what they had. Toys, clothing and decorations were increasingly homemade rather than bought. Despite the hardship a sense of togetherness emerged as families, including the Royal Family, battled through the war.

Candleholders



These two tin candleholders would have been clipped on to Christmas tree branches. Attaching lit candles to a branch was dangerous and could start fires. Electric lights have now replaced candles on modern Christmas trees.

Celebrating Christmas, as we would recognise it today, began to gain popularity in the 1920s. Christmas traditions were revived by an interest in the novels of Charles Dickens. In the nineteenth century he wrote stories such as *A Christmas Carol* which stressed seasonal sentiments of joy and giving.



It was during this decade that the shopping store Woolworths, introduced cheap decorations. They sold candleholders, Christmas stockings and miniature trees. Everything was less than sixpence (about 2½p today). Previously the high cost had meant it was the richer families that had enthusiastically decorated at Christmas. Lower prices allowed a greater number of people to furbish their homes for the holiday.



The Second World War affected British celebrations. Initially people thought the conflict would 'be over by Christmas' but the fighting continued. People had to adapt their Christmas as food became rationed and goods were harder to buy. Families created their decorations, like these candleholders. Presents became expensive so that toys and children's costumes were made rather than bought.

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Glass baby feeder



Did you realise this object was a baby bottle? The design is called the 'Allenbury' feeding bottle and was popular from 1898 until the 1950s. It was special because a sterilised rubber teat and valve were included for the first time. Improving hygiene with a sterilised teat made it harder for babies to catch a virus. The company were aware of the growing importance of hygiene and cleanliness. On the box they have included instructions on how to care for the feeder properly.



Also important was how much easier the new design was to clean. Earlier bottles, such as that in the photograph to the right, had been ceramic rather than glass. Parents had been unable to check if food was stuck.

Birthday card



The 1930s fashion was to keep designs simple. Pieces such as this card often based their images on earlier styles. This one mixes together the enthusiasm for arts and crafts with sixteenth century Tudor designs.

The popularity of arts and crafts grew at the beginning of the twentieth century. People often looked to nature for inspiration, this has a flower motif as its border. Each corner has a flower that resembles a Tudor rose.

Would you write a message to your Mum like the one inside?



Above: A Tudor rose

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Linen mat



This is a linen mat with an embroidered pattern. Embroidery has existed since the Iron Age as a method of decorating clothing. It has also been used to record history. One example is the Bayeux Tapestry. It is a story showing scenes from the Battle of Hastings where William the Conqueror defeated Harold for the English throne. A copy that was embroidered during the 1880s is on display at the Museum of Reading.



Before the Second World War, women's magazines started to include patterns with instructions. A piece of clothing or decorative pieces for the home, such as this mat, could be produced. Teapots would be placed on the mat to prevent it scratching the table.



During the Second World War embroidery became an important skill as clothes and materials were in short supply. The leaflet on the right shows how even the armed forces magazines encouraged their readers to knit. Notice how the man and woman are modelling scarves, jumpers and mittens.

Pyjama case



Children's pyjamas would have been stored in this. A family has used it for a long time and you can see where it has been repaired. Some of the new stitching might have been done in the 1940s. Repairing items or turning them into new pieces was encouraged through a government slogan of 'Make Do and Mend'. A few little holes would not have meant it was thrown out.



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Utility body gown



The utility body gown is a garment worn by a baby.

We can tell this is utility clothing because of the CC41 mark on the neck's label. This symbol stands for Civilian Clothing 1941 and was on all utility clothing. The unusual CC became known as 'the cheeses'. It later appeared on items of furniture and linen as it widened beyond only providing clothes.

During the war, raw materials were in short supply. The government wanted to ensure that cheap clothes would still be available. Utility clothing was introduced meaning manufacturers agreed to provide a simple choice of clothing but in a variety of colours. Prices were regulated, so they remained affordable. The public grew to appreciate the utility clothing because it was durable.



Above: The unusual CC41 symbol

CC41 continued after the war finishing in 1951. The need for the government to insist on cheap, simple clothes was no longer required.

Five photographs



The photographs feature children wearing outfits from the 1930s and 1940s. Increasingly photography became more accessible during this period. Cameras were easier to work, smaller to hold and produced pictures of quality at cheap prices.

The two babies photographed are wearing gowns, similar to that in the box. The Second World War led to a scarcity of resources so that at a very young age boys and girls wore the same style of clothing.

As boys and girls got older fashion separated them. One of the differences is clear in the photo of the boy standing next to his grandmother. Boys wore shorts all the time, even at school in the winter! Girls are shown in their dresses, sitting down wearing bows in their hair. Can you see the similarity between the dresses of the girls and those of the mothers?

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Handkerchief



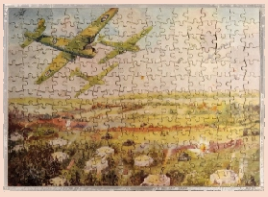
This delicate handkerchief has the symbol of a crown in the corner. It commemorates the accession to the throne of George VI. Celebrating a new king was often accompanied with memorabilia bought as a souvenir of the day. The faces of the king and queen would be on plates and teacups as well as handkerchiefs.



George VI had succeeded to the throne when his older brother, Edward VIII abdicated. Edward had been told to give up the throne by the government. His relationship with Wallis Simpson, a twice divorced American was seen as socially unacceptable. In the 1930s divorce was thought by many to be wrong. The government at the time felt that the public 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 George VI.

The new king and his family became very popular. After the scandal surrounding Edward, many were happy with a king who had a settled family. His wife and two daughters became popular fashion icons for adults and children. In the 1940s Britain suffered heavy bombing from German aircraft. Amongst the buildings hit was Buckingham Palace. It was suggested the family temporarily leave and move to Canada. They refused and stayed, often visiting bombed areas. The feeling that the Royal Family was also suffering through the fighting did much to cement the affection felt towards them.

Jigsaw puzzle



This puzzle is from the 1940s. The scene shows British RAF planes with blue, white and red circle markings fighting the grey German planes. Many children's games at this time had a patriotic theme associated with the Second World War as it affected their lives. Amongst the more popular Christmas gifts were junior Navy and Airforce uniforms.

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Leather purse



This is a leather purse that girls would have carried with them as an accessory. Leather is a popular material because it looks nice, is tough and durable. Once it has finished being treated it becomes water-resistant. This makes it perfect for items such as purses and covering furniture.

The leather can come from many different animals. It could be from a calf, a buffalo or even alligator!



Preparing leather is a long process that has been practiced for 7,000 years. Originally, skins were dried in the sun and then softened by pounding them in animal fat and brains. Finally the leather would be preserved through salting or smoking.

Modern treatment follows the same pattern.
The three stages are called dehydrating, tanning and preserving. Dehydrating is removing the water held in the leather. To do this the material is air-dried or pickled with acids and salts. Tanning the leather is a messy and smelly stage! The leather is soaked in a bath with a chemical called chromium salt. This leaves the leather soft and flexible, like that of the purse. Finally the leather is completely dried to preserve it and dyed a chosen colour.

Many people now object to animal skins being used for clothing and materials. They feel it is wrong to kill an animal for its skin. Instead they encourage people to wear synthetic leather, a man-made version very similar to the traditional type.