Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

BABY, 1913 H325

All the items in this box, except for the gown, were given to the museum by a donor who dated them to 1913. The donor presumably had a particular baby in mind, whose birth date was known and remembered.

Bowl



In 1827, John Smith built a group of potteries in Staffordshire which came to be known as the 'Foley Potteries'. This business was later owned by the Wileman family and later still by the Shelley family. It became the producer of some of the finest bone china in the country. In 1910, the 'Late Foley'/Shelley mark, which can be seen on the bottom of this bowl, was adopted by the company. It was in use until 1916. This helps to confirm the donor's claim that these items date from 1913.



The Shelley pottery recognised the value of making items for children. In the mid 1920s they produced nursery wares by the famous children's illustrator Mabel Lucie Attwell (left).

The teddy bears on this bowl have longer limbs and more pointed snouts than those of today. This was characteristic of many bears from this period. The teddy bear gets its name from Theodore 'Teddy' Roosevelt, President of the United States from 1901 to 1909. In 1902, while hunting, he refused to shoot a bear which had been tied to a tree, saying such an act was unsportsmanlike. At the same time, in Germany the Steiff firm produced a stuffed bear which was shown at the Leipzig Toy Fair in Germany in March 1903. Some of these were exported to the USA and soon there was a craze to own a teddy bear. The first British bear was made by J K Farnell in 1906. Many British manufacturers experienced a boom during the First World War (1914-1918) when German imports were banned. The photograph on the right shows a bear made in 1913.



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Reading Borough Council
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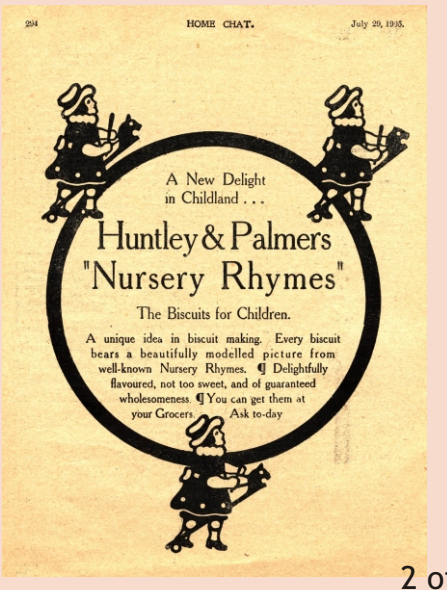
The shape of the bowl is similar to today's children's bowls, with a deep base and high rim to prevent spillages. There are signs of damage and the central transfer has been worn by the spoon and by cleaning. In two places on the rim there are tiny spots of gold paint and there is evidence of a line running through them. These may be the remains of another part of the decoration, which has now almost completely worn away. The fact that the bears are playing football and cricket may indicate that this bowl was originally designed with boy babies in mind - but, as we shall see, there is other evidence that suggest the items may have been for a girl!

Baby Powder Puff and Pot



This powder pot is made of tin. The puff is so delicate that museum staff have not attempted to clean it. It is made of feathers with a cotton cover and a bone handle. The tin itself has traces of paint on the base, but the decoration has almost completely worn away particularly on the lid. There are small dents in the body of the tin and the lid. These signs all suggest that it was well used. Marks of rust connect the tin to the water used in cleaning the baby before applying the powder. The pink colour on the handle of the puff may indicate that it was first bought for a baby girl - which rather contradicts the evidence from the bowl!





The two adverts for Huntley & Palmers Nursery Biscuits date from the early 1900s. In the same period they also made Nursery Rhyme Biscuits (right), in which each biscuit represented a well-known rhyme.

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Teething Ring



This is made from bone, a traditional material given to babies to chew on when they are cutting teeth. It is hard, but not cold and could be sterilised by boiling. The ring shape is easy for a small hand to hold. The ribbon could be pinned to the baby's clothes to stop it from falling on the floor. This ribbon is a replacement for the original and had been attached by the owner before it was given to the museum.

Hairbrush



The brush is also made of bone. Its soft bristles have been worn by use, but they also show a slant which occurred during storage, when it was lying on one side. The brushing movement over the baby's head is unlikely to produce a slant in one direction like this. It is common to find bone in use for items which today might be made of plastic. Plastic is sometimes designed to look like bone, as a nostalgic reminder of 'traditional' artefacts.

Bib

This bib was hand-made. The design of items like this stayed the same for many years and it would be difficult to date without some accompanying information.





A photograph of children at Coley Steps, Reading, about 1911. During the nineteenth century this area of cheap housing was perhaps the most impoverished area of Reading. Coley Steps ran down the slope towards the Kennet. Much of the poorest housing was demolished in the 1930s and 1950s. During the 1970s the Inner Distribution Road flattened more of the area.

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Gown



The gown is not a part of the 1913 group donated to the museum service, and is undated. The date is not easy to guess from the design, but it could have been made at about the same time. It is probably not a christening gown, as it is simply made, with a skirt of coarse and hard-wearing cotton material, possibly re-used sheeting. The bodice is made of a softer more comfortable cotton or linen fabric which has been pulled and frayed in places. The left sleeve has been damaged - was it perhaps sucked or chewed by the baby who wore it?

Babies, both boys and girls, wore long gowns for warmth - their toes could be tucked inside. They did not need their legs free while they remained babes in arms and were not yet crawling or walking. They may have had their movements further restricted by wrapping or swaddling in shawls and blankets.



Above: A Huntley & Palmers biscuit tin in the shape of a pram. This tin was made in 1930, some time after the date of most of the items in this box. It could be used as child's toy after the biscuits inside had been eaten.