THE MAKING OF CLAY PIPES
IN LEICESTER

by

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Fragments of clay tobacco pipes dating from the seventeenth century onwards are found in fair quantities whenever excavations take place in the centre of the town, and some of these may have been made locally, but virtually no information exists about local pipe-makers before the earliest Directory of 1793. Like so many of Leicester's minor industries pipe-making never reached commercial status in the accepted sense of the term but was confined to a few families working in the back-yard kilns of half a dozen cottages or small shops. Conditions were primitive and the work arduous. Long hours were involved in the preparation of wet clay for the moulds followed by exposure to the heat and smoke of the kiln fire. Then finally came the distribution of the pipes which involved pushing barrows for miles to remote inns and village shops. The net profit of a few pence per gross seems a small if not inadequate reward for all the effort, but an old Broseley saying ran: “When pipe-making is in your blood you can’t do much about it”.

The earliest reference to a pipe-maker occurs in the Leicester Directory for 1793 which records that George Salisbury was working in Bond Street. He is the only maker mentioned at that time but he is listed again in 1815 when he had to compete with Richard King, who also made clay pipes in his grocery and chandlery shop in Belgrave Gate. By 1823 George Salisbury had been joined by Thomas Salisbury, presumably his son. Richard King was still working and fresh competitors had appeared in John and James Cox and Robert Bennett, the latter combining the trades of pipe-making and brush-making in his shop in Charles Street. In 1835 Piggott’s Directory records the same four pipe-makers still in business, which suggests no great increase in local demand during those twelve years. By 1846 Leicester was becoming an industrial town with an increased population so it is not surprising to find that in White’s Directory for that year no less than seven clay-pipe manufacturers are listed. The old pioneer of 1793, George Salisbury, had disappeared, but his son, Thomas was still in business in East Bond Street as a “China-and-glass dealer and pipe-manufacturer”. The Cox and Bennett families are still listed but Robert Bennett had prospered sufficiently to turn his old shop in Charles Street into a private house and transfer his “brush-and-pipe-making manufactory” to Free Lane. Pipe-making was only a side-line to Robert Bennett’s important trade as a brush-maker and it is likely that by the eighteen-sixties he had abandoned it. The firm which he had started as a young man who came to Leicester from Syston in the seventeen-nineties became eventually the well-known local firm of H. & A. Bennett Ltd. in Bowling Green Street and later in Market Street. It is interesting that Robert Bennett not only made clay-pipes, he also “re-conditioned” them. Churchwarden pipes were sent by
publicans for re-baking in his kiln. This was the standard method of cleaning them after prolonged use by customers. Of old firms only John and James Cox remained faithful to pipe-making as their only line of business but this is probably explained by the fact that they made their pipes at their house in Bedford Street which was away from the shopping centre of the town.

In the mid-nineteenth century pipe-making, as such, hardly provided a reasonable family income but combined with some other trade it might be developed as a profitable side-line. The rapid increase in Leicester's population at this period did not entail any further increase in the demand for clay pipes because in 1863 only six makers are listed. This was due to the growing popularity of wooden and meerschaum pipes which could be imported cheaply from Germany. In 1884, the number of makers had dwindled to three, which perhaps may have encouraged an enterprising young pipe-maker from Broseley to set up in business in Frog Island. The young pipe-maker was William Flanagan. A native of Broseley in Shropshire where pipes are still being made, he came to Leicester about 1885 and made his first pipes at his house, 36 Frog Island. Later he moved to 17 Bath Lane where he worked until 1919 when the business closed. He died in 1921.

In October 1959 Leicester Museum was fortunate to acquire three clay-pipe moulds from Mr. T. H. Flanagan which had been used by his father who was one of the last of the Leicester pipe-makers. The information he was able to give is important as a record of a small local industry which has now ceased to exist. There is one other pipe mould in the Museum Collection (119' 1908). This mould produced a plain 15" long pipe and was used in the business of R. W. Taylor, 60 North Quay, Great Yarmouth. Considered to be a “museum piece” in 1908 it probably dates from about the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Manufacture and Sale of Clay Pipes:

A cart-load of grey clay was brought to the house and the lumps were unloaded and stacked in the yard. The first process was to beat the clay up until it was “mushy” and then roll it out flat on a table, like pastry. It was next shaped by hand into thin rolled strips with a thick bulb at one end. A length of wire was threaded through each roll to form the stem of the pipe and the thick end of the roll was turned over by the thumb to form the bowl. The pipe, in its crude form, was then laid into the open half-mould and the other half of the mould placed on top. The complete mould was then clamped into the “ginhead”, a special type of wooden vice used only in this trade. Next, the metal “stopper”, which hung on a cord from the roof, was brought down and plunged into the mould to form the inside of the bowl and, most important, to connect with the end of the wire in order to “make the draught”. The wire was then withdrawn, the mould opened and the pipe removed. This had to be done with care because the clay was still soft. Next, the pipes were placed on racks to dry before being “trimmed”, which entailed an examination and removal of all surplus clay before firing.
PLATE IV

Upper: Clay pipe of "churchwarden" type, nineteenth century. The mouthpiece is missing, complete pipes of this type are rare. This example was found in the chimney of an old house in Loughborough.

the bowl of the pipe. The first two are self-explanatory—"The Oak" and "The Thorn" but the third mould is a much more elaborate affair which, from the nature of the design, had to be cast in three separate sections. It shows a man carrying a small boy on his back with the title inscribed below—"SAM TORR ON HIS DADDY-O". It represents the title of a popular Music-Hall song of about the turn of the century, a great favourite, apparently, at the old Palace in Wharf Street. This was a much more expensive pipe for those days. The wholesale price was 6s. 6d. per gross, to be retailed in the shops at 2½d. each.

Sometimes a local pipe can be ascribed to a particular maker. A few years ago the writer dug up part of the bowl and stem of a pipe in his garden at Thrussington. It bore the inscription "TWELLS. LEICESTER" and could be dated to the second half of the nineteenth century. It is in the Museum collection (52' 1955). Mr. Flanagan remembered a local competitor to his father's business: Twells in George Street. Henry Twells was making pipes at 47 George Street in 1884.

In the early years of the present century it seems that an effort was made by the makers to bring their pipes up to date in order to attract customers of the younger generations. New moulds were obtained, often elaborately designed, to appeal to the sportsman or local patriot. This was shown recently by the discovery of a collection of pipes in an old rubbish tip on Anstey Gorse. The bowls were attractively decorated and inscribed with slogans and initials relating to sport and club life (98' 1957). Some examples will illustrate this:

"PLAY UP LEIC."
"R.A.O.B." (Buffaloes).
Harp and Shamrock.
Steam and Sailing Ships.
"T.W." and Heart.
"L.C.C.C." (Leicestershire County Cricket Club).

It is now forty-five years since Flanagan's Factory closed down. Today it is very difficult, but not impossible, to purchase a clay pipe in Leicester. After many unsuccessful attempts the writer recently found one in a tobacconists' shop in the Market Place, priced at 4½d. Upon its stem is the inscription "E. SOUTHORN. BROSELEY".²

1. Ex. inform. R. D. Bennett.

Leicester Museum would like to record its gratitude to Mr. T. H. Flanagan without whose assistance the writing of this paper would have been impossible.