



Collecting Ceramic Pot Lids

By Bruce R. Pynn
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Pot lids are the covers of small pottery containers used to hold a variety of manufactured products, primarily from 1840 to 1910.

They were frequently decorated by transfer-printing to describe the contents. Prior to the invention of the transfer-printing process, the brand names of manufactured goods were hand-lettered onto the side of the pot or described by means of a paper label pasted on the lid. Although laborious by today's standards, the transfer-printing process introduced a much quicker and economical method of describing the contents than did hand lettering. This labeling method also allowed for a greater degree of artistic expression and enticed buyers by the aesthetic appeal of the package.

This process was distinctively English. It originated in Liverpool in the second half of the eighteenth century. Although not in general use for packaging until the 1840s, transfer printing was used for domestic porcelain and pottery in the intervening period.

By World War I, it had been virtually eliminated by cheaper methods. The transfer is lifted onto tissue-thin paper from an engraved copper plate that previously has been inked or colored. It is then transferred to the lid after the first baking (i.e., the bisque stage) and rubbed until the print firmly adheres to the pottery. The paper is then carefully removed, usually by washing or floating it off in water and the lid glazed and fired to fix the design as an integral part of the pottery.

Because of the high production cost of multicolored advertising pot lids, single colored lids dominated the market. Gold bands were sometimes added around the border of the container to give the product a high-class appearance.

The majority of pot lids were circular. However, square, rectangular and oval examples are frequently found. They also came in various sizes from the small sample size of less than an inch and a half in diameter to 10 inches for economy size.

They often had elaborate designs and pictorials to attract the consumer. Several themes dominate the pictorials on the lids. The first being Royalty - everyone was seemingly the dentist or perfumer to the royal family. Secondly, attractive girls and aristocratic men to appeal to ones vanity. Thirdly, farm scenes, boating and animals were popular for food pastes.

Dental products often have images of teeth, toothbrushes and cherries which seemed to be the most popular flavor. Finally, architectural structures and exotic settings were also common.

Pot lids first appeared in England when town and cities were expanding rapidly in the mid-1800s and retailers



produced a number of household commodities for domestic use or consumption. The wide variety of products such as bear's grease, toothpaste, cold cream, salves and ointments or cure-alls, edible pastes and shaving cream were packed in earthenware pots with printed lids and advertising.

The pot and lid were eventually consigned to the dustbin and then off to the local dump. Pot lids are excavated from Victorian and Edwardian dumps (often called tips) by collector-diggers. Diggers often have to do extensive library research to find old tips and are largely responsible for the intense interest in these lids.

Ambitious retailers found the glazed earthenware lids as a useful means of advertising themselves and their commodities. They were used until the first world war when more economical packaging techniques evolved, such as collapsible toothpaste tubes, tins and cardboard boxes or glass containers.

Toothpaste became the major product associated with these pots, just as today it is the main product associated with tube packaging, and was the most popular commodity sold in pots printed with lids.

Interest in keeping teeth clean became popular in the late 17th century and escalated during the 18th. The local druggist, chemist or surgeon dentist all sold tooth powder. Toothpastes came in many flavors such as cherry, areca nut, honeysuckle, orange, tomato, carbolic acid and even odd concoctions like myrrh and borax! Tooth paste was also referred to as tooth powder or tooth soap.

Undoubtedly, the second most popular product packaged in a ceramic pot was cold cream. Hygienic concerns escalated as the expanding social calendars of the



middle class society increased and in turn increased the demand for beauty products. Many small chemists made their own concoctions, later providing diggers and collectors with many regional varieties.

Manufacturers of edible products also took advantage of this attractive form of packaging. Caviar and fish pastes were frequently sold in these ceramic pots because of the impracticality of transporting fish from the coast to inland towns. The fish was packaged in vinegar which increased its shelf life and proved to become a popular food alternative for the expanding Victorian middle classes.

While English pot lids number in the thousands, American pot lids number only in the hundreds. Pot lids can be found throughout the United States but are concentrated around the coastal areas like New York and San Francisco. Jules Huel, Xavier Bazin and H.P. & W.C. Taylor, all of Philadelphia, exhibited their pot-lidded products at the Great World's Fair of 1851.

Orders for transfer-decorated pots made by Staffordshire potters were received from many countries around the world such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, France, Italy and India.

In 1977, Ron Dale produced a superb book, *Price Guide to Black and White Pot Lids*, which documented 2,341 different pot lids. Since then, there has been a surge in pot lid collecting.

Alan Blakeman, publisher of the *British Bottle Review*, says there are probably more than 7,000 varieties of pot lids worldwide. Other books also have been produced, *Collecting Australian Pot Lids* by Robert Keil and *American Pot Lids* by Barbara and Sonny Jackson in 1981 and 1987, respectively.

This introductory article was designed to give the reader a baseline knowledge of pot lids. Future articles will focus on the many different varieties, specific manufacturers and unique individuals in the pot lid world.

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Photos by Bruce Pynn.