

COLLECTING WISELY

Tobacco stoppers

BY JAMES MACKAY

OCCASIONALLY IN junk shops and antique markets one will come across small objects which, on first glance, appear to be letter seals, but the fact that the business end is quite plain indicates that some other purpose was intended. These objects, their handles often highly ornamented, are tobacco stoppers, used by pipe-smokers to tamp down the tobacco in the bowl.

No satisfactory explanation has ever been advanced for the decline in the popularity of these pieces. It used to be argued that the stopper was used to husband the dregs of the precious pipeful, in the days when tobacco was an expensive luxury.

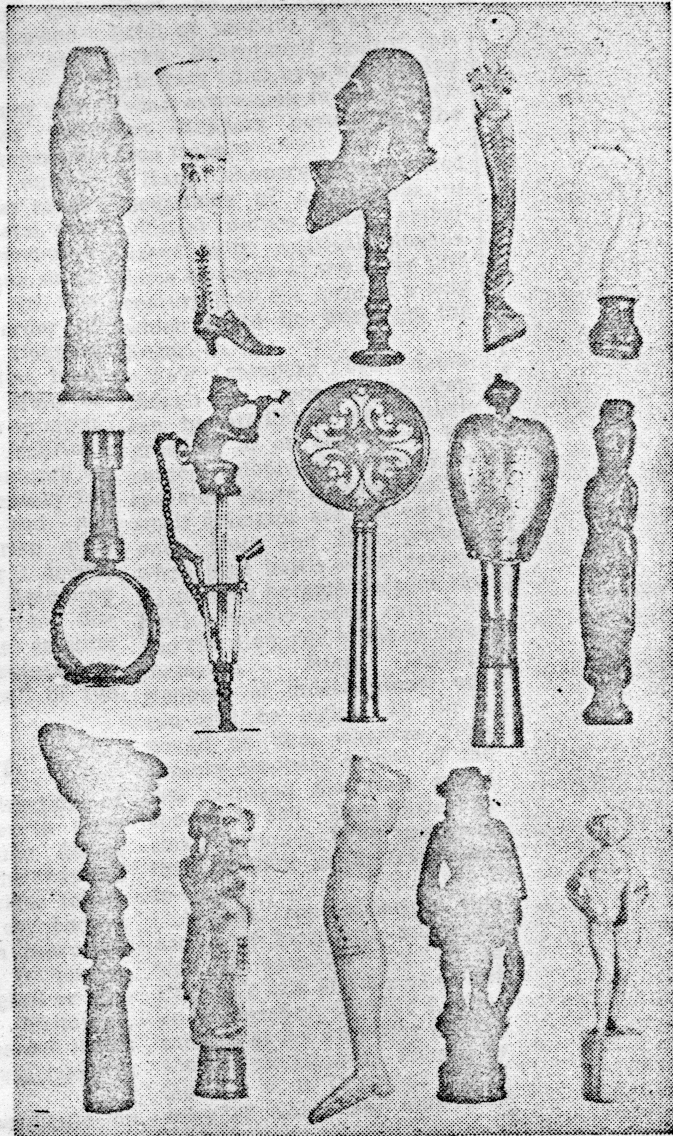
The real purpose, however, of the tobacco stopper was to keep the tobacco reasonably tightly packed in order to produce the correct amount of "draw." The effect of combustion of the leaf was to raise and loosen the tobacco in the bowl and the stopper had to be employed frequently to pack the leaf more closely.

Sudden demise

The techniques of pipe smoking have not altered since the middle of the last century and thus it is something of a mystery that the tobacco stopper should have gone out of use about that time. Pipe smokers to-day make use of various unsatisfactory expedients, such as a pencil stub or even their finger-tips. Pen-knives for smokers often have a handy gadget in the form of a stopper attached at one end, but this invention can scarcely be credited with the sudden demise of the ornamental tobacco stopper.

Whatever the reason, this interesting item had almost entirely disappeared from the scene before 1850. Nor can it be ascertained exactly when tobacco stoppers first came into use though it is presumed that something of the sort was in use by the early 17th century when pipe-smoking became widespread in Europe. The majority of tobacco stoppers now in existence belong to the 18th century.

In *London Labour and the London Poor*, published in 1851, Henry Mayhew mentions a vendor of tobacco pipes and boxes as saying that formerly he sold little bone tobacco stoppers, "but they're seldom asked for now; stoppers are quite out of fashion."



Many of the earliest stoppers were whittled from wood or bone, but the use of these materials is not a sure indication of age since these continued to be popular until the 1840's, particularly among the poorer classes. Better quality stoppers were elaborately carved in ivory and these are now among the most highly prized. Numerous examples of tobacco stoppers have been recorded carved from pieces of wood which had some special association or historical interest. Examples of stoppers carved from pieces of the Boscobel oak which sheltered King Charles II are in the British and London Museums.

Whalebone, mother-of-pearl and various kinds of shell were also used, though such materials were relatively scarce. Among

the other non-metallic substances sometimes encountered are glass, earthenware and porcelain, the latter occasionally intricately painted and glazed.

The favourite medium for tobacco stoppers was undoubtedly metal and thousands must have been cast during their heyday. Brass was easily the most fashionable metal, and the majority of the ornamental stoppers found in antique shops to-day were produced in this alloy. In ascending order of scarcity one will find stoppers in copper, bronze, latten, lead, iron, silver and gold. Many of the brass stoppers now in circulation are somewhat spurious in that they were produced at the end of the 19th century for sale to collectors and not intended for utilitarian purposes. However, after a decent lapse of time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the genuine article of the 19th century and the "collector's piece" of the 1890s.

Arbitrary edict

The principal attraction of tobacco stoppers lies in their decoration. A popular device was the stopper in the shape of a human leg in various forms, either unclothed or booted. Small figures, often representing popular heroes, Dickensian characters, mythological or allegorical personages (Britannia, St. George), cherubs and ladies were also popular, especially in brass.

A not uncommon figure on tobacco stoppers was the Duke

of Wellington, an allusion to the fact that, as Commander in Chief, he had forbidden the habit of smoking in army barracks. Resentment against this arbitrary edict by a non-smoker found expression in the numerous stoppers portraying the Iron Duke.

Many stoppers incorporated medallions of a religious or political nature, often embellished with satirical slogans. Some stoppers of the early 18th century took the form of a ring which could be worn on the finger.

Few stoppers are dated, though an approximate date can be attributed on stylistic grounds, or on account of the subject depicted. Generally speaking, those stoppers with a small diameter are the earliest ones, from the 17th century when pipe bowls were narrow. As tobacco became cheaper the bowls became more capacious and the diameter of the stopper increased. Brass tobacco stoppers of indeterminate age can still be picked up for a pound or two, whereas 17th-century stoppers in one of the less common materials might cost up to £50. Most dealers in small antiques have examples through their hands from time to time.

Anyone contemplating this aspect of bijouterie might do well to consider Lot 93 in Christie's sale of Objects of Art on Wednesday, October 7. This consists of the collection of over 500 tobacco stoppers, formed by the late V. B. Crowther-Benon, some of which are illustrated here.