

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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NEWSLETTER

No. 116, April 2015

From The Collection

PRESSING MATTERS



Irons
in our
Collection

In this age of t-shirts and jeans and the general acceptance of being comfortably rumpled rather than starched and pressed, ironing is fast becoming another lost art on the home-front.

However, two hundred years ago, ironing was considered an essential household task: how else to keep the gentlemen's shirts crisp, or the lady's shift or cap charmingly perky instead of limp as old lettuce?

In most middle and upper class households, ironing was the job of the laundress. Not only was she responsible for pressing the family's personal linens, but also tablecloths, napkins and bed linens. Often the mistress's finest linen would be ironed by her lady's maid or sometimes the housekeeper.

Fun Facts

***On average you will burn 460 kjs for every hour of ironing that you do.**

***A quarter of men still get their mothers to do their ironing.**

The Very First Irons

No-one can say exactly when people started trying to press cloth smooth, but we know that the Chinese were using hot metal for ironing before anyone else. Pans filled with hot coals were pressed over stretched cloth as illustrated in the drawing to the right.



Smootherers

Meanwhile in Northern Europe cloth was being “smoothed” with stones, glass or wood. Water may have been used to dampen linen but it is unlikely that the smootherers were heated.

It wasn't until the late middle ages – 14th and 15th centuries - that blacksmiths started forging simple flat irons.

Thus began the household chore of “ironing” named for the metal of which this device is commonly made.

Flat Irons in Our Collection



This small, rusty flat iron was donated by Joe Marshall (owner of the Commonwealth Hotel for many years).

Adele Hurley donated this small triangular shaped cast iron clothes iron on a metal stand. The stand has small legs and holes in its base and it is a Salter brand.



These two flat irons are made of solid cast iron with hollow iron handles.



They too are Salter brands – 7 and 8. They were made in numbered series which related to their size, although there was no standardisation in the series between manufacturers.

George Salter & Co of Bromwich in the U.K. produced a wide variety of domestic appliances from the 1760's. It continues today as a U.S. based company – Salter Housewares.

Flat Irons

Sad irons, also called **flat irons** are shaped pieces of metal that are flat and polished on one side and have a handle attached to the other.

“Sad” is an Old English word for “solid”.

Flat irons were heated on top of stove. Often the person ironing had two irons - one to iron with and the other heating on stove ready to use when the other cooled down. Large households with servants had a special ironing-stove for this purpose. Some were fitted with slots for several irons, and a water-jug on top.

Flat irons were heavy to use and were generally cleaned with bees' wax and a cloth before use.

Mrs Potts' Cold Handle Sad Iron



This Mrs Potts' iron in our collection is a double point design with detachable handle. The detachable insulated handle was designed to be always cool for ironing. The handle was detachable, so that several irons could be on the stove at one time and the handle swapped between several bodies. There is no handle with our iron. Mrs. Potts invented the Potts Removable Handle Iron in 1871. Her invention of the Cold Handle Sad Iron changed the clothing iron industry. The detachable insulated handle was designed to be always cool for ironing. The handle was detachable, so that several irons could be on the stove at one time and the handle swapped between several bodies.

Fun Fact

***One in five people admits to using ironing as a way of enjoying time away from family or partners.**

BOX IRONS

Box-irons were wedge-shaped boxes with a sliding-door on the back. A fitted iron insert, called a slug, would be heated and slipped inside. The advantages were that the heat would be more evenly distributed, the face of the iron could remain spotlessly clean, and several slugs could be kept heating at once to insure a near-constant source of heat. An average box-iron weighed close to 2kg; the weight made ironing easier, and helped press the cloth with less muscle.

Larger box-irons could hold live coals inside, and were called charcoal-irons. For centuries charcoal irons have been used in many different countries. When they have a funnel to keep smoky smells away from the cloth, they may be called chimney irons. Modern charcoal irons are manufactured in Asia and also used in much of Africa.



Box irons are still being used in Southern India by the “dhobi wallahs”.

Box

Irons

In

Our

Collection



This charcoal iron (above) was donated by Mary Gilbert.



Donated by Mr W. Meehan, this iron (above) has a chimney as well as a wooden handle.

The large black charcoal iron (below) has a chimney on the top. The metal hand protector is quite ornate and it has a hollow base into which charcoal is placed. The small hole at the back has a sliding cover that was used to regulate the temperature of the iron.

It was manufactured by T. & C. Clark and Co in Wolverhampton, West Midlands, England.

Ruby Jennings donated this item.



Fun Fact

***Women do an average of 346km of ironing in a lifetime--the equivalent of eight marathons-- whereas in comparison, men iron 117km worth.**

The Tailor's Goose

Tailors used heavier irons to press open seams.

These were called geese, not only because of their long handles like a goose's neck, but also because of the hissing sound that a hot iron made when pressed onto dampened cloth.

The iron would be heated on the range or stove to achieve a high temperature before using.

This goose iron in our collection has a twisted handle and comes with a stand. It was donated by Kaye Lynn



FUEL IRONS IN THE COLLECTION



This fuel iron (above) has a small cream-porcelain body and black handle. The back is a bulb-shaped container for holding the fuel. This is a kerosene operated Tilley Model DN 250n iron. It has a regulating generator which enables the user to control the heat.

The manufacturer of this iron, Tilley, is still in business as Tilley International PLC, in Surrey, England. It began business in 1818 as W.H. Tilley.

This iron was originally made as model DN250 with a cream body and tank from 1950-60. Production was moved to Ireland circa 1960, the body was then chromed, the tank painted cream or red and it was now model DN250A. Production of the 250A ended in 1970.

Irons that are heated by natural gas, alcohol, kerosene and gasoline are categorized as liquid fuel irons. The irons that were heated with these fuels could readily be ignited and the heat could be controlled. Since little or no smoke and soot was produced, liquid fuel irons represented a major improvement over charcoal irons.

Fuel irons date from the 1880s. The discovery of petroleum oil and the refining produced a cheap substitute called 'coal oil' or Kerosene that could be used in the same stoves and irons. Gasoline came along later and it burned with a hotter flame. Pressurizing the fuel in the tank with an air pump provided improved control of the flame and greater economy.



This is a metal iron enamelled in blue colour, with a silver coloured fuel reservoir shaped like a bowl. This most likely stored Shellite which was the fuel to heat the iron. The handle is also blue and made of wood.

Fun Fact

** Henry Seeley invented the first electric iron in 1882.*

* All collection photos were
taken by Barry Miller.