

South African toothpaste pot lids

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As towns and cities rapidly expanded in the 1800s, manufacturers and retailers had to develop new methods for packaging and transporting the large number of household commodities required for domestic use or consumption.

These newly developed ceramic containers soon became the standard of the day, housing numerous products that came in a paste form, such as bear's grease, cold cream, salves and ointments to edible pastes, shaving cream and... toothpaste. Most manufacturers and retailers went one step further, taking the opportunity to print advertising on the lids of the small pottery containers. As competition became fierce, manufacturers and retailers made wild and often false claims about the benefits of their product to out-manoeuvre the opposition.

Just as happens with the containers of today, most of these jars were considered dispensable and were consigned to the dustbin and eventually ended up in the local trash dumps of the time. There they remained for many generations before eager collectors excavated these long forgotten sites (often called tips), searching for rare and attractive examples of yesteryear.

The earliest proprietary tooth powders were packaged in labelled paper bags, wooden containers with revenue stamps, and small ceramic pots covered with parchment or paper which was secured with string. 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.

The invention of the transfer printing technique allowed a much more durable method of promoting the contents, and the lids were frequently decorated using this method. Although still laborious by today's standards, this also allowed for a greater degree of artistic expression, effected with the aim of enticing buyers through the aesthetic appeal of the package.

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The process was distinctively English, originating in Liverpool in the second half of the 18th century. However, the main centre of production in the UK was the Staffordshire potteries. They would receive orders from throughout the world including the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and Canada. Pot lids would remain in popularity until the end of the first world war when more modern and now familiar forms of packaging became established.

The method of printing on a pot lid was multi-staged and time-consuming. The transfer was lifted on tissue-thin paper from an engraved copper plate that had been previously inked or coloured. It was then transferred to the lid after the first baking (the bisque stage) and rubbed until the print firmly adhered to the pottery. In most cases, the paper was then carefully removed, usually by washing or floating it off in water. Finally, the lid was glazed and fired to fix the design as an integral part of the pottery.

As a result of the high production cost of multi-coloured advertising pot lids, single coloured or monochrome lids dominated the market. Most dentists or chemists of this era packaged toothpaste or pharmaceutical products such as cold cream and hair restorer in pots with monochrome lids. Gold bands and serrated edges were sometimes added around the border of the container to give the product a high-class appearance.

The shapes of the pot and lid also evolved after their inception. For the first 30 years of their use, all printed pots were round in shape with flat or domed lids. From the late 1870s and 1880s, rectangular and square lids became popular. Oval-shaped pots and lids were also manufactured, with far less acceptance, because these were difficult to pack and store. The toothpaste pots came in various sizes from a small sample size of less than an inch in diameter to five inches for economy size. Occasionally dentists produced specialty toothpaste containers (Figure 1).

Victorian advertising yields fascinating insights into the early days of mass marketing. Many of the lids were printed with elaborate designs and bright colours, which made them stand out amongst other lids, the majority of which were monochromatic.

Several themes dominated the pictorials on these lids. A popular theme was the inclusion of images of attractive girls and aristocratic gentlemen, conveying the message that "you too could look this good". Farmland scenes, beehives, horse & carts presented a message of natural, wholesome products; famous architectural structures sent a message of solidity, dependability and longevity; and unusual locations and exotic animals, such as palm trees, temples and camels, attempted to allure the consumer with rare, expensive and mysterious ingredients.

While all these themes had a following, the most successful was that eliciting a connection through the use of Royalty crests or actual images - it seemed that many of the dentists or perfumers were appointed by the Royal family - sending a message that if it was good for the rich and famous, it was certainly good for the commoner. Princess Alexandra of Denmark, later Queen consort to Edward VII, was the most popular Royal, appearing on 15 known varieties issued by five different toothpaste manufacturers.



Figure 1. Miscellaneous international lids.



Figure 2. Dental images and toothbrushes.

Dental images such as toothbrushes and teeth appeared on a few of the dental related toothpaste pot lids but were in fact quite rare (Figure 2); the majority of pictorial images commissioned by chemists or dentists were cherries or mosque/palm trees. The two most popular types of toothpaste flavours were areca nut and/or cherry. Cherry toothpaste was cherry-coloured by the addition of carmine or Armenian bole. Nothing was added to give the paste a cherry flavour, the description "cherry" being applied merely due to its colour.



Figure 3. RSA pot lids.



Figure 4. RSA pot lids.

The addition of cherry colouring and Indian areca, or betel nut as it is also known, inspired attractive pictorial adornments for the lids. Areca nuts were normally chewed with betel leafs for their effects as a mild stimulant... but they also have antihelmintic properties, although it is unlikely that many consumers realized they were being mildly dewormed when they cleaned their teeth!

Whilst the total number of English pot lids is believed to be around ten thousand, there are fewer than 300 designs of American pot lids. These can be found throughout the United States of America, but are concentrated around the coastal areas such as New York, Philadelphia and San Francisco. Jules Hauel, Xavier Bazin and H.P. & W.C. Taylor, all of Philadelphia, exhibited their pot lid products at the Great World Fair of 1851, which in turn popularized their usage over the next 50 years.

Canadian pot lids are even rarer with less than 25 known examples. These lids have been found in four provinces, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

Forty-seven South African pot lids have been officially recorded, but it is estimated that since then, at least another ten have been recognised. Of the 47 lids recorded to date, 36 are toothpaste lids (34 ceramic lids and 2 metal containers); 6 are cold cream and 11, ointments (including Oog Zalf/Salf/Salve).

Thirteen towns or cities are found on the South African lids, especially, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Boksburg, Pretoria, Kimberley, Port Elizabeth, East London and Pietermaritzburg (Figure 3).

The Floral Tooth Paste lid used by B.G. Lennon & Co. is striking with the crest of the Cape Colony almost filling the design. The company was founded in Port Elizabeth in 1850 by Berry Grey Lennon, grandson of Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape Colony (renamed Cape Province in 1910). This lid dates from before 1891. Lennon were successful wholesale chemists, druggists and druggists' sundrymen. Their pharmaceutical products are still sold in the 21st century.

Three Heynes' tooth paste lids are of interest because they can be dated from the 1860's until 1872. These lids state that Heynes' tooth paste was patronised by H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh, Queen Victoria's second son, Prince Alfred. He visited Cape Town three times. In 1866, as a sixteen-year old, he undertook a 1200 mile journey around the country by horse and wagon. The merchants of the town vied for his patronage, and Heynes, a chemist, was appointed to deal with the prince's pharmaceutical needs, including tooth paste. The Duke of Edinburgh visited the Cape again in 1867 as Captain of HMS Galatea, and returned for his last visit in 1872 (Figures 4 and 5).

The most beautiful, partially coloured, South African lid was used by J.H. Cooper who were chemists in central Cape Town and Sea Point from 1883 to 1925. Their Cherry Tooth Paste lid features brightly coloured cherries and leaves, surrounded by black and white text. The colour was possibly painted over- the-glaze at the time of production (Figure 6).

36 ADVERTISEMENTS.

JOHN HEYNES,
PHARMACEUTICAL CHEMIST,
Wholesale & Retail Druggist,
BRITISH DISPENSARY
CAPE TOWN.

PURE PHOTOGRAPHIC CHEMICALS
(GUARANTEED),
TOILET BOTTLES, SCENTS, SCENTED SOAPS,
HAIR, NAIL, AND TOOTH BRUSHES,
OF SUPERIOR QUALITY, FROM BEST MAKERS.

Patronised by H. R. H. the Duke of Edinburgh.

HEYNES' TOOTHPASTE,
A fragrant and useful Toilet Requisite, possessing singular virtues. It cleans, preserves, and beautifies the Teeth, giving to the Gums a healthy firmness, to the Breath a pleasant sweetness, and is a certain remedy for Toothache.
British Dispensary, Adderley-street.

HEYNES' TONIC WINE.

This Preparation is one of the pleasantest and most effectual Tonics ever offered to the Public, its basis being pure Quinine. It can be recommended as the best preventive against Fever, Debility, Loss of Appetite, &c., &c.

PRICE, 2s. 6d. per Bottle.

GENUINE PATENT MEDICINES.

Figure 5. Heynes advert.

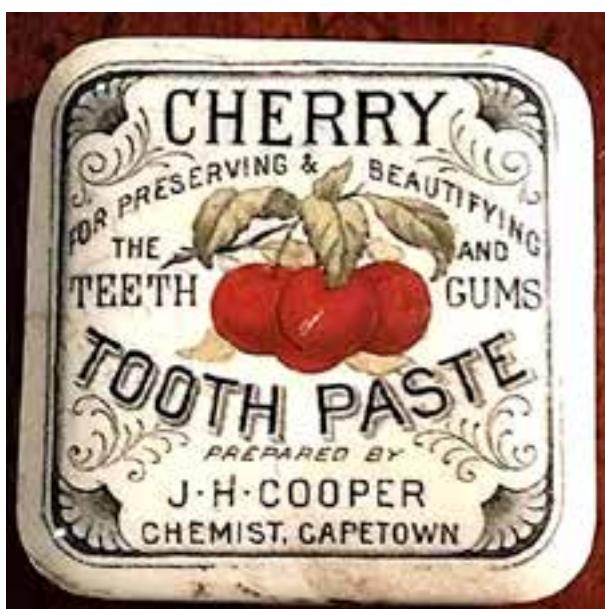


Figure 6. Cooper Cherry tooth paste.

Lidded tins post-dated the ceramic pot lids as a form of container for paste products, although there would have been some overlapping in the two forms of containers. Included here are two interesting South African examples of early 20th Century tin containers (Figures 7A and B).

Although reproductions are uncommon, several varieties have surfaced over the past few years. Fakes are also known and a common method to deceive is to glue a photocopy of a rare transfer to an original plain lid and to seal it with a varnish or lacquer.

More sophisticated fakes are glazed and fired at a low temperature and the kiln is opened early whilst still hot to produce artificial age crazing. Generally, forgers often use lids which are usually the wrong size and weight compared with the original lid.

Unfortunately, they can be difficult to distinguish from an authentic example so it's always worth checking with an expert if there are any doubts.

Books on the topic

1. R Dale. The Price Guide to Black & White Pot Lids. Antique Collectors' Club Suffolk UK;1977 (480 pages).
2. R Keil. Collecting Australian Pot Lids, Self Published; 1981 (220 pages).
3. S Jackson, B Jackson. American Pot Lids, Self Published; 1987 (91 pages).
4. B Houghton et al. Historical Guide to Advertising Pot Lids, Self Published: 2018 (713 pages).



Figure 7A. Colgate Tooth Paste - War Time Pack tin.



Figure 7B. Heynes Saponaceous Dentifrice tin.