

The Development of the Pipeclay Hair Curler— A Preliminary study

RICHARD LE CHEMINANT

ONE OF THE FEW artefacts of former centuries which has not yet received any detailed study is the hair-curler, sometimes mistakenly called wig-curler. This is the small cylindrical or sausage-shaped object, fashioned from pipeclay and usually measuring between two and four inches, which will be equally familiar to the excavator of post mediaeval London and to the searcher of the Thames foreshore. While it has been possible to collate a certain amount about curlers themselves, not a great deal of light has been shed on their origin or method of production and it should be emphasized that some of the conclusions reached in this paper are tentative.

Little is known about the manufacture of hair-curlers, which were in common use in the mid seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Strictly speaking they were called *bigoudis*, having originated in France, and were used for curling straight hair to make it suitable to become part of a wig. These wigs, which the curler helped to create, were originally worn by men in both France and England at the beginning of the seventeenth century, mainly to hide baldness, although women are known to have adopted them earlier than this, for example Elizabeth I. However, they did not become popular in either country for over another half century. Louis XIV was on the throne in France when his courtiers took to wigs, but the King himself did not wear one until after 1670, even if by three years later he had created the extraordinary number of two hundred court perruquiers. Charles II wore his own very long hair at the onset of the Restoration but shortly afterwards followed the French example, together with his sophisticated Court, who must have been ready for something more extravagant in the way of dress and coiffure after the repressive Puritan era. The widespread introduction of wigs was one of these changes and was to last until the turn of the nineteenth century although their use was fast declining towards the end of this period. Samuel Pepys, always in the forefront where fashion was concerned, recorded in November 1663:

'To church, where I found that my coming in a periwig did not prove so strange as I was afraid

it would for I thought that all the church would presently have cast their eyes upon me, but I found it no such thing.'

The use of pipeclay curlers, therefore, would have originated in the late sixteenth century but the vast majority of those excavated can be dated to the great days of wig-making, that is later seventeenth to early nineteenth century. After this, wooden *bigoudis* made of cane, boxwood and other suitable types of wood, replaced the clay. However, there was an overlap of some decades and both clay and wood were in use, at any rate in England, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, as shown by the following description of the making of curls for wigs taken from *The whole art of hair dressing* by James Stewart, published in London in 1782:—

'Hair which does not curl or buckle naturally is brought to it by art, by first boiling and then baking it in the following manner; after having picked and sorted the hair, they roll them up and tie them tight down upon little cylindrical instruments, either of wood or earthenware, a quarter of an inch thick and hollowed a little in the middle, (they have smaller for the very short and larger as the hair advances in length). These are called pipes, in which state they are put into a pot over the fire, there to boil for full three hours; when taken out they let them dry, and when dried they spread them on a sheet of brown paper, cover them with another, and thus send them to the pastry-cook, who making a crust or coffin around them, of common paste, sets them in an oven till the crust is about three fourths baked.'

Most of this, incidentally, was lifted word for word from 'Hair; the art and management in manufacturing it', pp. 118-9 in *The Family Pocket Book of True and Useful Knowledge*, compiled by Peregrine Montague of Oxfordshire in 1760. No Copyright Act then!

So it can be seen that to achieve the required effect hair was boiled and then baked by this method. Various references to both bakers and cooks making clay tobacco pipes in London in the mid seventeenth century have also been noted, occupations which had in common the need for large

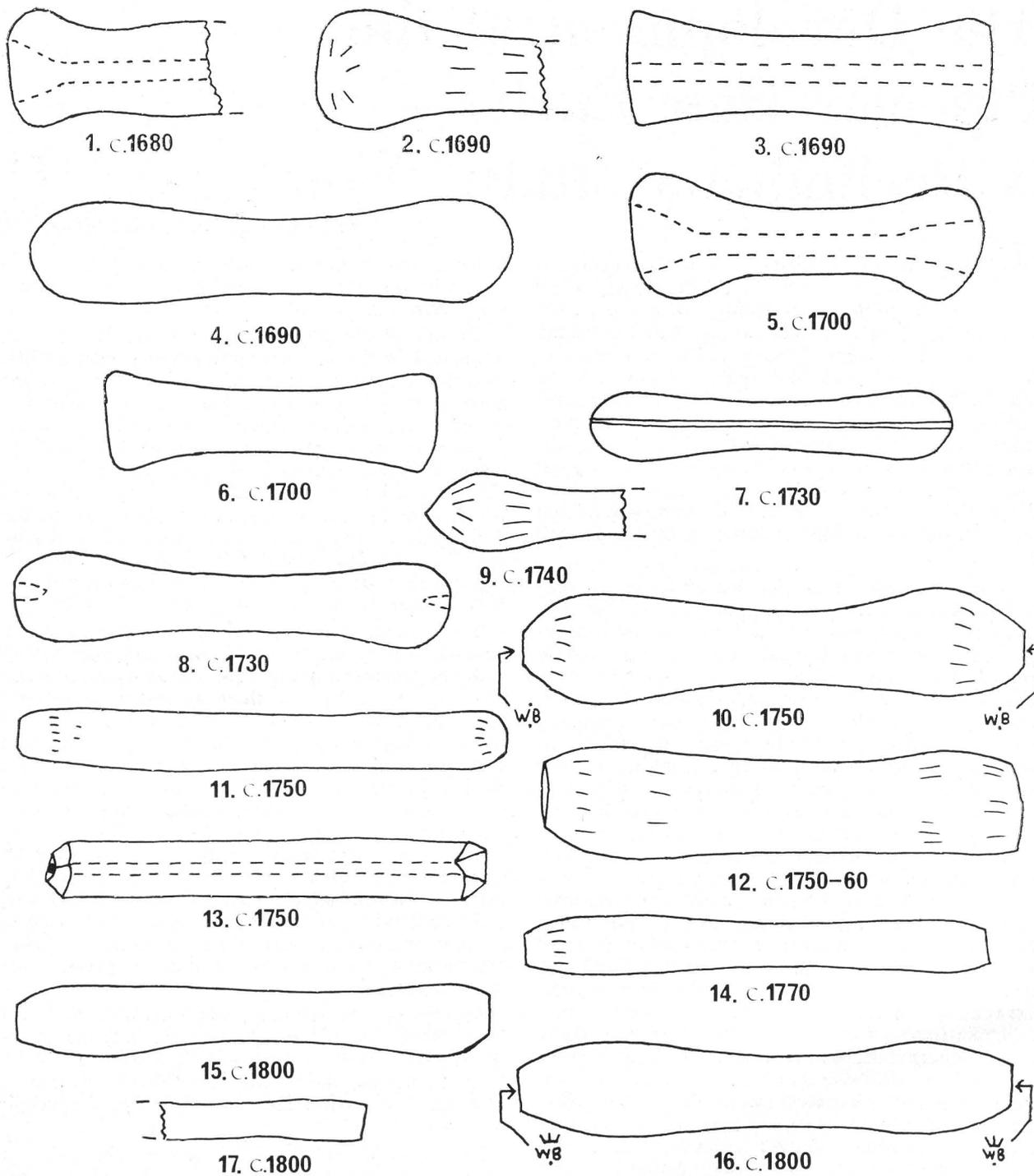


Fig. 1: Chronology of Clay Hair-curlers. Nos. 3, 4, 5 and 6: Museum of London Collection; Nos. 9-14, 16 and 17: Colonial Williamsburg Collection; Nos. 1, 2, 8 and 15: Le Cheminant Collection. Scale 1:1.

fireplaces or ovens. This is an indication of the same source of manufacture of pipes and curlers (see below).

There is a fuller description of the boiling and baking of hair in the contemporary French account of 1776 by Diderot from which the following translation by Mr. J. Stevens Cox comes:

'Wig makers have wooden curlers or toggles which are used for frizzing the hair. The curlers are of box or some other wood, and are three inches in length. They are made of different thicknesses. The smallest are only the diameter of the inside tube of a pipe, the second that of quills, the third nearly that of the little finger, the fourth the size of the little finger, the fifth that of the third finger, the sixth of the middle finger, the seventh slightly larger, the eighth the thickness of the thumb and the ninth thicker than the thumb. Curlers made of boxwood are best. In the past earthenware curlers (i.e. pipe-clay) were used. We have given up this practice because, when placed on the stove, the earthenware becomes too hot and overheated the hair. They were also made of cord and string wound in many turns, three inches in length. They were covered with fabric which was stitched on and which made them firm.'

As Diderot says, wooden curlers of boxwood were used in France and were known as *bilboquets*. A fellow country-man of Diderot, Mons de Garsault in his *Art of the wigmaker*, published in 1767 and also translated by Mr Stevens Cox, was of the opinion that 'the wigmaker should be furnished with a good number of "Bilboquets"; these are little boxwood toggles, about three inches long, round but thinner in the middle and rounded at the ends'. Diderot also notes that wooden curlers were sometimes known as *rouleaux* and in a separate account in his *Encyclopedie* summarizes the process of clay tobacco pipe-making in Northern France originally set down by Duhamel du Monceau two decades earlier. In one of the illustrations the rolled out and roughly shaped pipes are shown and described as *rouleaux* fashioned by the *rouleur*. In view of the name it is possible that curlers were also made by being rolled out in the same way before they were cut up into the required lengths, the larger and thicker ones being obtained from the bowl end of the *rouleau* and the smaller ones from the mouth end.

For obvious reasons it is the clay curlers which have survived for excavation and these are the primary concern of this article. Figure 1 illustrates various types of clay *bigoudis* and attempts to establish a chronology albeit within a rather loose time scale. With two exceptions these were all found, either in London or Colonial America, in

contexts of other archaeological deposits such as clay pipes or pottery, but it should be noted that the excavated material, at any rate from Williamsburg, provides *termini ante quem* dating and the curlers themselves could have been in use for a considerable period before they were thrown away. Accordingly, they are dated at least ten years earlier in most cases but a further decade on either side should be allowed. It should be noted that Nos. 7 and 8 were found on the Thames foreshore and have been 'fitted-in' on the basis of their shape and quality. It seems probable, therefore, that when curlers first came into use they were rough-and-ready articles, crudely fashioned (and the first three illustrated are among the earliest excavated) but that later on their appearance became more symmetrical and developed the regular dumb-bell, narrow-waisted shape with the cut-off ends which typifies most of those found. This is supported by contemporary descriptions from the second half of the eighteenth century. One of the early types (Fig. 1, No. 2, broken) bears clear impressions of finger and thumb prints where the clay has been roughly shaped at the end, and the shaft has been 'stroked', as has No. 5, so as to give a shiny appearance similar to some contemporary tobacco pipes, more especially Dutch. This polishing was in fact a pipemaker's technique. Regional varieties may differ in their shape, e.g. some from the Marlborough area have completely flat, wide ends and a few found in Broseley have distinctive cuts to their ends.

There has been much discussion over the years as to whether or not clay curlers were made by some of the several hundred tobacco pipemakers who would have plied their trade at any one time in seventeenth and eighteenth century England and there is little doubt that clay pipe and curler manufacturers were one and the same. J. Houghton, in his 1693 edition of *A collection for improvement of husbandry and trade* includes the following in his account of the clay pipe industry:

... the pipes are used not only for tobacco but often to blow fires; and being warmed they curl hair if wrapt about them, and not only pieces of pipe but instruments are made on purpose for peruke makers to bake their hair on.'

This clearly relates to pipeclay hair-curlers. They have also been found in early nineteenth century debris from two pipe kilns in Truro, in association with clay pipes (Lemon Quay and Pydar St). Additionally, unmarked curlers together with mid eighteenth century pipes were found in

1. I am most grateful to Mr. H. L. Douch of the County Museum, Truro, for this information.

WB

WB

WB

WB

c. 1750-1800

WA

c. 1750

IB

c. 1800

Fig. 2: Stamped marks impressed on curler ends. All incuse. Scale 2:1.

a kiln at Meneage St., Helston¹. The name of a pipemaker, John Sims, working in Winchester 1691-1717, has been noted as being stamped on a clay curler². Mr. Stevens Cox, who comes from a distinguished wig-making family and is the author of *An illustrated Dictionary of Hairdressing and Wigmaking*, records that his grandfather used both baked hair-curlers and broken pipe stems for the manufacture of *frissure forcee* (forced curls) in the early nineteenth century. No. 13 in Fig. 1 is just such a piece of stem, excavated at Colonial Williamsburg, and pared at each end for use as a curler. With the five sixty-fourths inch bore that this specimen has it would have been used for smoking a decade or so earlier than the termini date. James Stewart (*op. cit.*) states: '... these (i.e. curlers) are called pipes ...' and it is almost certain that this use of the word pipe was derived from the clay pipe and provided the contemporary generic description.

The later clay curlers, post c. 1740, are so symmetrical as to appear to be made in a mould and as can be seen the shape remains very much the same up to their extinction early in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, none appears to have been found bearing a mould mark in this country and the same goes for those excavated at Colonial Williamsburg, which were presumably imported from England. However, clay curlers were known in Holland and Figure 1, No. 7 has on it definite mould 'seams', as depicted. It may be, therefore, that the Dutch had their own method of manufacture. Leaving this aside, several of those illustrated, and in particular the later specimens, show faint signs of having been 'finished' at the ends in a circular manner and it could be that some form of turning process was used, at any rate to produce the regular dumb-bell shape before the clay was cleanly cut off. A minority of the mid eighteenth century curlers have small holes or indentations at each end up to 10mm deep and it is possible that a kind of clamp was used to hold the roughly shaped clay rod so that a wheel could fashion it into the finished article. The earliest curlers were sometimes hollow, e.g. Nos 1 and 5 of Fig. 1. It is not clear why they were made in this way but judging by the approximately conical

space at each end it may be that the clay was built up around two wooden cores which joined in the middle and were removed when the curler was completed. This would have been before the more streamlined method of manufacture was evolved in the eighteenth century.

As already stated the initials stamped on both ends of some curlers are almost certainly those of the minority of pipe manufacturers who were producing curlers as a sideline. Compared with the quite large number of different pipemakers' initials impressed on their wares few marked curlers have been recorded (though equally, many more pipes would have been made). A number of eighteenth century waste pipeclay curlers were excavated in 1972 from a pit in Lower Castle St., Bristol, one bearing the initials T.B. (R. G. Jackson and J. Bennett). A.B. has been noted from Oxford, J.D. from Bath (the pipemaker John Ducey), and I. W., location unknown.

Additionally, half an eighteenth century example bearing five points impressed into the clay with an M incised between them has been found in Broseley (not a stamped mark). Two halves of eighteenth century curlers with little star marks, one impressed and the other incised, have also been found, at Salisbury and at Battersea. The writer is grateful to Mr. D. R. Atkinson for information concerning these last three, all of which are in his collection. Apart from the incuse star stamp from Battersea only three others from London are known, namely WB, IB and WA, all incuse, as shown in Fig 2.

WB is sometimes, and IB invariably, surmounted by a three-pronged crown or coronet, which, incidentally, is more akin to marks on contemporary French pottery than English. The various styles of stamps are illustrated in Fig 2. WB is by far the most common, more usually with a dot above and below, followed by the rarer IB and WA. The fact that so few initials from London (or elsewhere) have been recorded suggest that a very small number of manufacturers cornered the market and perhaps held monopolies for curlers in the same way as may have been had by the pipe mould makers who seem to have been few and far between. Account,

2. Information from Mr J. Stevens Cox.

however, has to be taken of the majority of curlers being unmarked and of the 192 complete examples in the Museum of London collection which have been examined by the writer, 134 are plain. Of the remainder 49 carry the WB stamp, with or without a crown, 1B crowned number 8 and only one WA was noted. So it is probable that over the years there were other manufacturers who produced curlers but who did not impress them with their initials, as of course, applies to the vast majority of clay pipes. WB, at least, had a wide distribution, and apart from Colonial America, has been found as far removed from London as Stamford, Lincolnshire and Bristol. The crown above the initials could indicate royalist loyalties (compare contemporary pipe marks) but it is unclear why, for example, WB should surmount some of his products and not others, unless it was to give customers a choice. What does seem certain is that the London initials came into use only c.1740 with the dots above and below tending to appear prior to the crowns. And it can be seen from the curlers excavated at Williamsburg that the WB marks were impressed on the ends over a period of at least half a century, which may indicate a well-established maker. No similar WB stamp has been re-

corded on a clay pipe of that period but this is unsurprising since from the early eighteenth century nearly all London pipemakers' initials were incorporated in relief in the mould on each side of the spur and rarely appeared on the base as they had done in previous decades. In addition, the curler stamp is likely to have been specially designed so as to fit on to the small ends.

This short paper is an attempt to throw some light on the method of manufacture and chronology of the clay hair-curler which, as shown, was produced in France and Holland as well as in England, and no doubt in other European countries also. The writer would be interested to hear, at 30 Elsenham Street, London, S.W.18, from anyone who has additional information on the subject or who knows of different varieties of, or other initials on, these artefacts. He is most grateful to Mr. J. Stevens Cox for much specific information and for permission to quote extracts from his books; to Mr. Ivor Noel Hume, Director of Archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, and the Museum of London, for allowing the reproduction of various curlers in their collection; also to Mr Adrian Oswald for suggestions and advice.

Bob Dobson

3 Staines Rise
Staining
BLACKPOOL, FY3 0BU

A CATALOGUE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL BOOKS

being published Summer '78
will be sent on request.

★ ★ ★

North Country books bought and sold.

University of London GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE

School of Adult and Social Studies

Five University of London Extra-Mural evening courses for adult students in 1978/9:

- (a) Diploma in Archaeology—Prehistoric Europe Course 3
- (b) Certificate in Field Archaeology—Roman-British Period in S.E. England
- (c) Industrial Archaeology Group
- (d) A General Introduction to Medieval Pottery
- (e) Anglo-Saxon Pottery

Send for evening course programme containing details of these and all other evening courses:—

**School of Adult and Social Studies (A),
University of London Goldsmith's College,
Lewisham Way,
London, SE14 6NW.**