

British Puzzle Jugs

Dick Henrywood

As a general rule I am not a great enthusiast for practical jokes, but being a collector of pottery, I must make an exception. The puzzle jug, intended for use in inns and public houses as a humorous drinking challenge, is a centuries-old tradition which still survives as a novelty today.

The defining feature of a puzzle jug is its pierced neck, which makes it impossible to pour or drink the contents. In fact, the jug is made with a hollow handle and a hollow ring around the neck, typically fitted with two or three spouts. The idea is that the beer can be sucked up through the handle and drunk from one of the spouts by covering the others with your fingers. However, this might be a little too obvious, so the potters typically

included one additional small hole, usually up underneath the handle, which also had to be covered before the beer could be sipped. Very simple examples can be found with only one spout, but the most challenging jug I have seen was fitted with six spouts. It would have needed a real contortionist to get at the contents of that one!

In his admirable article, "Strong Ale, Wet Joke – Puzzle Jugs Through the



A fine collection of nine puzzle jugs from the 18th and early 19th centuries, including Liverpool delftware, white salt-glazed stoneware with scratch blue decoration, brown salt-glazed stoneware, pearlwares, and Bristol and Leeds creamwares. *Courtesy Sotheby's London.*

Ages" (Antique Collecting, September 2001), Robin Hildyard traced their origins back to late thirteenth-century France, although the true puzzle jug does not appear to have emerged in England until around 1500. The standard form was certainly made in maiolica in Urbino, Italy, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and it became popular in Britain from the middle of the seventeenth century.

Rhyming Delftware

Most seventeenth and eighteenth-century jugs were made in tin-glazed earthenware, known as delftware. Two good examples are shown here, both probably made in Liverpool. One is dated 1732 and is hand-painted with a popular verse:

*Here Gentlemen come try your skill
I'll hold a wager if you will
That you don't drink this Liquor all
Without you spill or let some fall*

The other is somewhat later, around 1750-60, and has a different verse:

*In this can there is good liquor
Fit for parson or for vicar
But how to drink and not to spill
Will try the utmost of your skill*

The verses are charming, with quite a range to be found. Most of them offer the same basic message but collectors are inevitably attracted to less common ones, such as:

*What tho' I'm common and
well known
To almost every one in town
My bunch to sixpence if you will
That if you drink you some do spill*

or,

*Fill me with ale, wine or water
Any of the three, it makes no matter
And drink me dry if you be willing
In doing so you'll win a shilling*

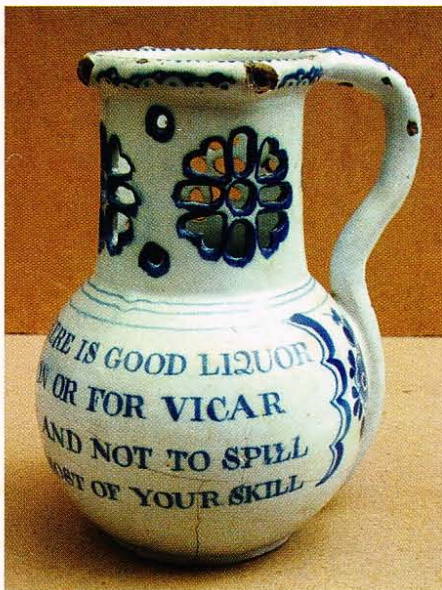
(Note the eighteenth-century version of inflation with the wager increasing from sixpence to a shilling.)

Stoneware

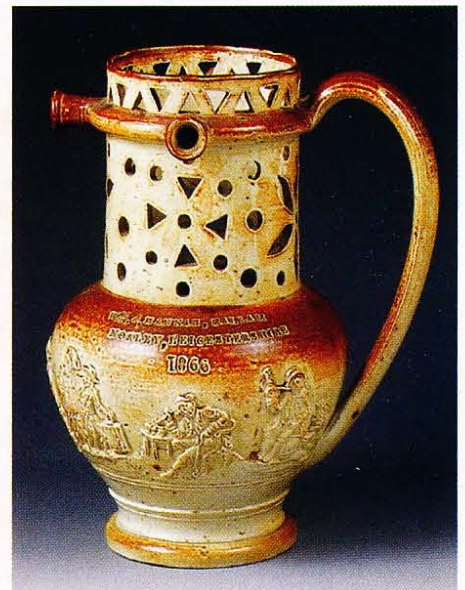
Jugs in tin-glazed earthenware were superseded as finer earthenware bodies were developed. Jugs in brown stoneware had a long lifespan. They were made in the eighteenth century in Derbyshire,



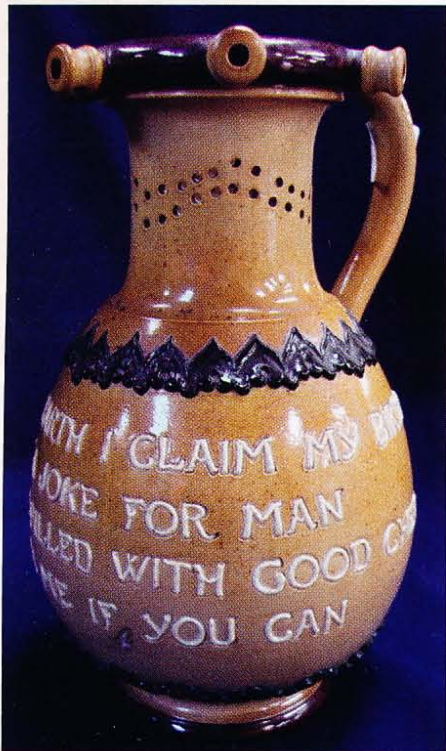
Delftware jug of the standard form and with a common verse, probably Liverpool, dated 1732. Courtesy Dreweatt Neate, Newbury.



Delftware jug, probably Liverpool, c. 1760, and with a less-common verse. Courtesy David Lay, Penzance.



A typical mid-19th century brown stoneware jug, probably from Derbyshire or Nottingham, inscribed and dated "Wm. & Hannah Hallam, Nosedley, Leicestershire, 1866". Courtesy Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet.



A Doulton, Lambeth, jug, c.1890, with inscription "From Mother Earth I claim my birth ..." Courtesy Hansons, Mackworth.



A fine, late 18th-century pearlware jug, with a drinking scene hand-painted in underglaze blue. Courtesy Tennants, Leyburn.

Nottingham and Yorkshire, and production extended to London, Bristol and other centers in the nineteenth century. One good example shown on the previous page has a Leicestershire inscription and is dated 1866.

Before moving on to the finer wares, we should note the resurgence of decorative stonewares later in the nineteenth century, particularly by the famous Doulton firm in Lambeth. It produced a wide range of artist-decorated wares which included a number of puzzle jugs. The example shown here is quite typical, with a verse:

*From Mother Earth I claim my birth
I'm made a joke for man
And now am here fill'd with
good cheer
Come taste it if you can*

Exactly the same form can be found with the verse on the delftware example dated 1732, "Here Gentlemen come try your skill ..." These Doulton puzzle jugs were popular in the 1890-1920 period.

Hand-Painted Creamware and Pearlware

The development of high quality earthenwares, such as creamware and pearlware, in the second half of the eighteenth century provided the potters with the ability to make much finer wares. The use of simple verses tended to fade out in favor of visual patterns and scenes. From about 1780 through to 1840 might be considered a golden age for the manufacture of puzzle jugs.

The first example shown here is of pearlware and dates to about 1790. It is painted in underglaze blue with a scene of two gentlemen smoking and drinking, one seated at a tripod table which bears the number "666," the sign of the Anti-Christ – a puzzle why it should appear on a puzzle jug. The next two jugs are hand-painted with colorful floral designs. The first is in the style of wares made at Bristol and painted by William Fifield. The second is quite similar in form and could again be from Bristol although Yorkshire cannot be ruled out. The decoration is much sparser but it is lifted by the inscription for Samuel Mellor and date of 1825.

We also show an unusual jug, with just a single spout, that is attributed to Swan-



A pearlware jug colorfully painted in the Bristol style by William Fairfield, c. 1820. Courtesy Bonhams, London.



A creamware jug hand-painted with polychrome flowers, inscribed and dated "Samuel Mellor, 1825". Courtesy Mellors & Kirk, Nottingham.

sea in Wales. An unfair friend of mine suggested that Welshmen would not be clever enough to cope with more than one spout but this is immediately belied by the next jug. This one is a bit later and very different in form, being of a so-called "pouch" shape. It is a fascinating example since the puzzle is more complicated. The spouts are actually dummies which serve no function and the key to accessing the contents is a small row of holes disguised by the brown line running around beneath the pierced neck. There are twelve holes in groups of three and in each group two holes are dummies, leaving one hole to be covered. Frustratingly, the working hole is positioned differently in each group and it is difficult to sort out which is which without peering closely and running the risk of spilling the contents at the same time. Cunning, these Welshmen!

Transfer-Printed Jugs

Although hand-painting did survive for a long time on puzzle jugs, probably largely due to their rather individual nature, transfer-printing was to become dominant from 1800 onwards. Before looking at purely printed jugs, we illustrate a fine Sunderland luster jug which combines hand-painting and transfer-printing. It dates to about 1820 and is printed in black with a verse, a panel depicting the Mariner's Compass, and on the side shown a presentation name and one of the tradi-

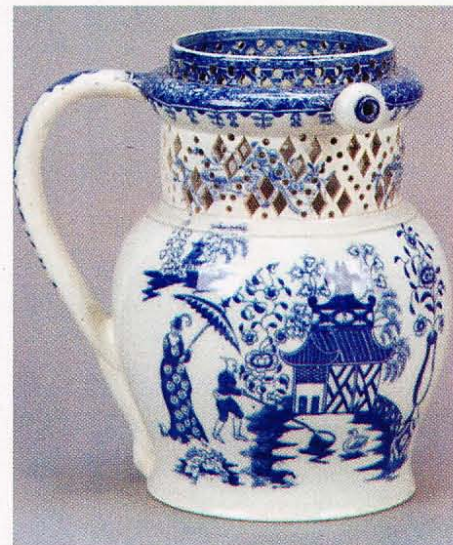
tional puzzle jug verses "In this jug there is good liquor ..." The care taken in making this jug, with its hand-painted polychrome border, is typical of presentation luster-ware from Sunderland and other potteries in the northeast of England.

Blue-printed puzzle jugs are among the most desirable and consistently achieve high prices at auction. We show another Swansea jug here, this time decorated with chinoiserie scenes, typical of the 1780-1810 period. The side illustrated features

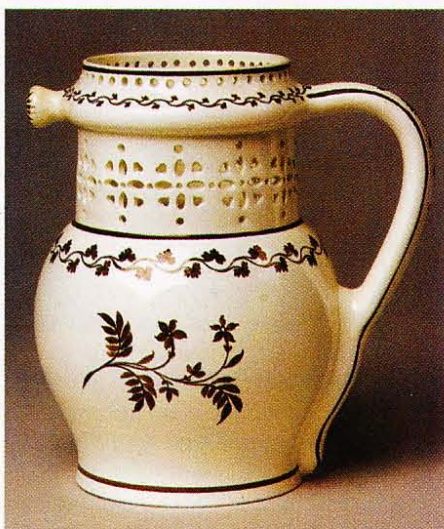
a lady wearing a Welsh hat, while the reverse has a sought-after design known as the Precarious Chinaman pattern. This jug fetched an outstanding £3,300 (\$6,000) in 2004. The other blue-printed jug is also highly desirable, this time because it is decorated with a scenic pattern, one of Ridgway's "British Scenery" series, albeit with an unusual border. It is well-known to collectors, being illustrated in *The Dictionary of Blue and White Printed Pottery*, 1982.



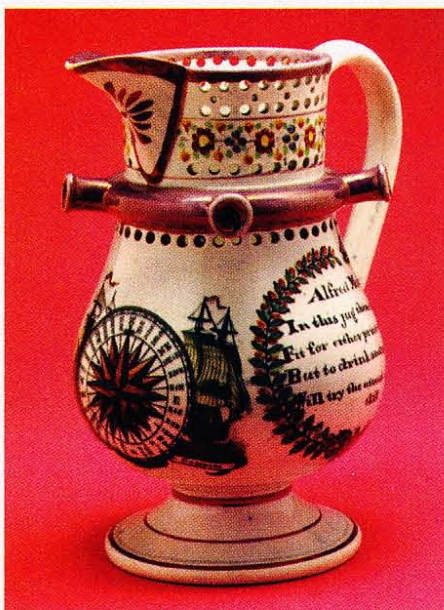
A Welsh "pouch" shape jug boldly painted with colorful sprays of garden flowers, Dillwyn & Co., 1830-40. Courtesy Bearnes, Exeter.



A \$6,000 puzzle jug printed in blue with a chinoiserie scene including a lady with parasol wearing a Welsh hat, Swansea Cambrian Pottery, 1800-10. Courtesy Dreweatt Neate, Newbury.



A Welsh single-spout jug in creamware with simple brown monochrome decoration, attributed to the Cambrian Pottery at Swansea, early 19th century. Courtesy Bonhams, London.



A fine Sunderland jug decorated with pink luster, a polychrome painted border and black-printed designs including one of the usual puzzle jug rhymes. Courtesy North-east Auctions, New Hampshire.



A puzzle jug attributed to John & William Ridgway, printed in blue with a scene from the "British Scenery" series, 1825-30. Courtesy Dreweatt Neate, Newbury.



Two typical "crested china" puzzle jugs, one by Arcadian with the "Borough of Reading" crest, the other with an emblem for the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition in London. *Author's collection.*

Traditional puzzle jugs are not cheap, with many selling for hundreds of dollars, and some well into four figures. However, the impecunious collector need not completely despair and I finish this article with two miniature puzzle jugs in "crested china." Examples like this were made by many of the crested china manufacturers in the early twentieth century. Few of them have any significant value, just a few dollars each, but they are fun and look good as a group.

So there we have it – a wide range of puzzle jugs dating from the seventeenth century to much more modern times. It is a fascinating subject and thinking about

all the beer they must have contained has made me quite thirsty. I think I shall repair to our local Dartmoor hostelry, recently voted pub of the year. A suitable venue for testing puzzle jugs!

Dick Henrywood is a consultant, author and lecturer, specializing in British pottery and collectors' items

For the various illustrations we are indebted to auctioneers Bearnese, Bonbams, David Lay, Dreweatt Neate, Hansons, Keys, Mellors & Kirk, Northeast Auctions, Sotheby's, Sworders and Tenants. ■