



PUZZLE JUGS

Dick Henrywood takes another look at an old-fashioned practical joke

I suspect that many male readers will have at least one of those annoying mates whose first greeting down at the local is 'Where's the beer you owe me then?' It's quite probable that you never owed him one at all, but it does seem to be a standard greeting from certain characters. Back in earlier times potters came up with just the thing needed to discourage such spurious claims.

Known today as a puzzle jug, it takes the form of a bulbous jug with an extensively pierced neck which would preclude any attempt to pour or drink

the contents. In fact the jug is made with a hollow handle and a ring around the neck fitted with two, three or sometimes even more spouts. The idea is that the beer can be sucked up through one of the spouts by covering the others with your fingers. However, this might be a little too obvious, so the potters had the knack of including one

additional small hole, usually up underneath the handle, which also had to be covered before the beer could be supped. The most challenging example I have seen was fitted with six spouts and would have needed a real contortionist to get at the contents!

The early history of puzzle jugs was admirably covered by Robin Hildyard

Above. Figure 1. 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. (Sotheby's, London)



Figure 2. English delftware puzzle jug of the standard form and with a common verse, probably Liverpool, dated 1732. (Dreweatt Neate, Newbury)

in his fine article 'Strong Ale, Wet Joke – Puzzle Jugs Through the Ages' (*Antique Collecting*, September 2001) where he traces their origins back to France and the late 13th century. He concentrated on early jugs and those made by smaller potteries around the country, particularly in stoneware, tin-glazed earthenwares and some finer wares from the early years of the 19th

century. A typical group of such wares is shown here (figure 1), including one in scratch-blue salt-glazed stoneware and another in plain creamware.

Possibly the most common of the 18th century jugs are those made in tin-glazed earthenware or delftware, named after the town in Holland where this type of pottery was dominant. Two good examples are shown here (figures 2 and 3), both probably made in Liverpool, and each hand-painted with the same 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 first of the two is more interesting with the inscribed date 1732, which is quite early. The other would be somewhat later, probably around 1760, and exhibits much less care in the making.

While on the subject of verses, quite a range can be found, but most of them offer the same basic message. However, collectors are inevitably attracted to less common variants and others noted include:

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

and:

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 18th century version of inflation with the wager increasing from sixpence to a shilling. One more example must suffice here:

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

The current author's interest in these jugs is more in the 19th century examples, when the earlier coarse pottery bodies had been superseded by finer earthenwares. By this time the use of verses tended to die away and two good early 19th century examples are shown here (figures 4 and 5). The first of these has the further novelty of a pierced main body enclosing a rustic figure and also features some lustre decoration. The



Figure 3. Another delftware puzzle jug, similar to figure 2, again probably Liverpool, but a little later, c.1760. (Dreweatt Neate, Newbury)

other is attractively hand-painted with a band of roses, very much in the style of painted wares from Bristol.

By the early 19th century transfer printing, particularly in blue, had become the dominant form of decoration for utilitarian wares but the potters did use the technique on virtually every pottery vessel. Printed puzzle jugs can be found although they



Figure 4. An early 19th century earthenware pink lustre puzzle jug of circular form with piercing revealing an internal rustic figure. (Bonhams, London)



Figure 5. A pearlware puzzle jug colourfully painted in the Bristol style with a band of pink roses, c.1820. (Bonhams, London)



Figure 6. A Swansea Cambrian Pottery puzzle jug printed in blue with a chinoiserie scene including a lady with parasol wearing a Welsh hat, c.1800-10. (Dreweatt Neate, Newbury)



Figure 7. Another Swansea Cambrian Pottery puzzle jug, this one printed in blue with the Carnation or Peony Rose pattern, c.1805-15. (Dreweatt Neate, Newbury)

are quite rare and tend to be correspondingly expensive. The puzzle jug was a relatively standard product in Swansea, and two good examples are shown here. The first (figure 6) is decorated with chinoiserie scenes, typical of the period, notable on the side illustrated being a lady wearing a Welsh hat. The reverse has a sought-after design known as the Precarious Chinaman pattern. The second jug (figure 7) is decorated with a floral design, also used at Bovey Tracey, which is variously known as the Carnation, Peony Rose or, sometimes, the Chrysanthemum pattern.

Two further blue-printed jugs are typical of the slightly later period between 1820 and 1835. By this time chinoiserie designs had been superseded by scenic views and these two jugs are printed with a rural scene from John & William Ridgway's 'British Scenery' series (figure 8) and a very common scene known as the Wild Rose pattern which depicts a riverside walk created by the land-

scape artist Capability Brown at Nuneham Courtenay in Oxfordshire (figure 9).

The use of blue for printed wares became less dominant after 1830 or so although it remained the most popular colour for the domestic market. Since



Figure 8. A puzzle jug attributed to John & William Ridgway, printed in blue with a scene from the 'British Scenery' series, c.1820-30. (Dreweatt Neate, Newbury)

puzzle jugs are rarely marked it is not always possible to date them exactly but the next jug (figure 10), printed in black, was issued to commemorate the wedding of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert so can be dated to 1840. It is interesting to note that the traditional shape was still in use at this relatively late date. Although not illustrated, another jug of the same basic form has been noted printed in brown and enamel-coloured with a design of exotic birds and a printed mark for Cork & Edge of Burslem who did not start potting until 1846.

Although printed wares dominated at this period, hand-painting was never entirely superseded and another Swansea jug is colourfully enamelled with flowers (figure 11). Here the standard form has been replaced by the characteristic Swansea pouch shape but, quite apart from this change, this jug has other tricks to play. The spouts are actually dummies which serve no function and the key to accessing the contents is a row of



Figure 9. A blue-printed puzzle jug decorated with the common Wild Rose pattern depicting Capability Brown's riverside walk at Nuneham Courtenay, c.1820-30. (Bonhams, London)



Figure 10. A commemorative puzzle jug printed in black with a wedding portrait of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, c.1840. (Bonhams, London)

small 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 one 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!

Before moving on from these jugs of the traditional type, it must be emphasised that the potters continued to

make them in the coarser bodies. Just one example is featured here, in two-tone brown salt-glazed stoneware (figure 12). This is typically potted with sprigged decoration and similar wares can be found from any of the traditional stoneware potting areas such



Left. Figure 11. A Dillwyn & Co pottery puzzle jug boldly painted with colourful sprays of garden flowers, c.1830-40. (Beames, Exeter)



Right. Figure 12. A salt-glazed stoneware puzzle jug with typical sprigged decoration and a deceptive conical interior, c.1820-50. (Bonhams, London)

as London, Derbyshire or Bristol.

After early Victorian times, the production of traditional puzzle jugs in finer wares seems to have died out, although the form was continued by country potters. One particularly amusing example was made by Edward Bingham at Castle Hedingham (figure 13). He specialised in producing pseudo-medieval wares but this pot has more to it, being modelled on each side with two gentlemen struggling to use a similar puzzle jug. One side is entitled 'Nil Desp' (*nil desperandum*) and depicts their failure; the reverse has 'Eureka' and records their eventual success. I have always been attracted to jugs which have jugs as part of their decoration, but this one must be almost the ultimate example.

Jugs of the traditional type were quite widely produced in Devon in slipware, and although early examples are valuable, the style continued to be made well into the 20th century by the potters who made motto ware around the Torquay area. The form was also produced by Royal Doulton, and I can't resist quoting a verse from one



Figure 13. A Castle Hedingham earthenware puzzle jug modelled on each side with two men struggling to use a similar jug, late 19th century. (Bonhams, London)

of their early 20th century jugs:

Within this jug there is good liquor
'Tis fit for parson or for vicar
But how to drink and not to spill
Will try the utmost of your skill

During the mid-19th century these traditional puzzle jugs were supplemented by another type which is much less obvious. They look like a standard jug, without any piercing round the neck, but are fitted with an internal tube which stores liquid so that the contents can be siphoned through a hole in the base. As with the earlier jugs featuring obvious spouts, this type uses an extra small hole beneath the handle which serves as a valve. They were designed more for use as a party trick than a practical joke.

Two examples are shown here, the first by Elsmore & Forster who were potting at Tunstall in the 1850s and '60s (figure 14). They made a number of these jugs, which are not uncommon, all printed and coloured, this one with two Harlequin or clown scenes together with three cock-fighting scenes titled 'A Set Too' [sic], 'A Knock



Figure 14. An Elsmore & Forster puzzle jug printed and coloured with two Harlequin or clown scenes and three cock-fighting scenes, c.1855-65. (Dreweatt Neate, Newbury)



Figure 15. A Chrysanthemum factory jug relief-moulded in white earthenware and enamelled in colours with a design of hanging game, c.1825-50. (Dreweatt Neate, Newbury)

Down Blow' and 'The Death'. Close examination of the image will reveal the small hole inside the handle near the top. Others feature a famous clown called Grimaldi, who had died when Victoria came to the throne in 1837, and one presentation example has been noted with the date 1860.

The second example of this type is relief-moulded with a representation of hanging game, including birds, rabbits and a fox, clearly intended to attract country sports enthusiasts (figure 15). I must confess that the actual jug shown here is not a puzzle jug but exactly the same design is known with the siphon tube fittings, the only difference being the replacement of the greyhound handle with a simplified angular handle shaped rather like a figure seven. This moulded design was made by an unknown pottery, known to collectors as the 'Chrysanthemum factory' due to a small sprigged flowerhead pad mark found on undecorated examples in stoneware. This dates them to the 1825-35 period so they are earlier than the Elsmore & Forster examples above. Other relief-moulded jugs with the same puzzle jug siphon action are known.

While these siphon-type jugs can quite easily be found in the £50 to £150 range, the traditional puzzle jugs are not cheap, with most selling for some hundreds of pounds, some for significantly more. The Swansea example in figure 6, for example, sold at auction for nearly £3,300. However, the impecunious collector need not completely despair since many of the early 20th century makers of crested china included puzzle jugs in their ranges and these are very inexpensive.

Three typical examples are shown here, the first two (figure 16) decorated with crests for the Borough of Reading and the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition held in London. Neither of these has significant value, just a few pounds each. Reading does not seem to have many collectors and crests for larger towns and cities do not usually excite much interest on such a common model. The exhibition subject might help the other jug to ten pounds or so, but it would have been better still with a crest for the British Empire Exhibitions, held at Wembley in 1924 and 1925, which attract quite a few collectors. The third jug (figure 17) is



Figure 16. Two typical crested china puzzle jugs, one by Arcadian with the Borough of Reading crest, the other by an unknown maker with an emblem for the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition in London. (Author's collection)

slightly different, with a colour picture of Queen Mary's Military Hospital at Whalley, in Lancashire, in place of a crest. Views are usually worth a bit more, and with its military connections, this one sold for £24.50 on eBay. Arcadian examples are often inscribed 'Model of Puzzle Jug, original in South Kensington Museum'. Other makers sometimes printed a version of the usual verse on the back.

So there we have it – more puzzle jugs through the ages. A fascinating

subject that has made me quite thirsty. I think I shall repair to our local Dartmoor hostelry, which has just been voted CAMRA pub of the year. A suitable venue for testing puzzle jugs!

Dick Henrywood is a consultant, author and lecturer, specialising in British pottery and collectors' items. We are indebted to Bearnes, Bonhams, Dreweatt Neate and Sotheby's for the illustrations.

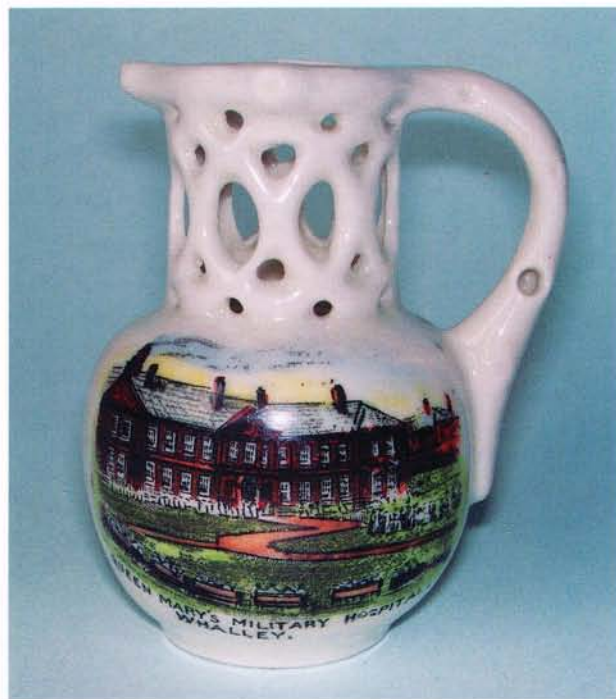


Figure 17. Another crested-type jug, this one by Carlton with a coloured view of Queen Mary's Military Hospital at Whalley in Lancashire. (Author's collection)

