



THAT TAKES THE BISCUIT!

Decorative Biscuit Tins of the 19th and 20th Centuries

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In one form or another packaging plays a major role in modern society. Any visit to a supermarket will result in a significant quantity of wrapping paper and bags, cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, tin cans, glass bottles and jars, all brought home in the ubiquitous plastic carrier bags, which, in Britain if not in Ireland, are still so freely available. The vast majority of this packaging will quickly find its way into the dustbin or

wheelie bin (itself a modern icon rather symbolic of the wasteful society in which we live) or is destined for a trip to the local recycling centre, but one or two items traditionally have a slightly longer life. Pre-eminent amongst these is the humble biscuit tin.

Although under continuing pressure from Tupperware and similar plastic containers and from the American-style ceramic 'cookie jars', the biscuit

tin remains a part of our daily lives, both at home and in the workplace, but the use of attractive tins to contain biscuits can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century.

Various patents concerning printing on tin were taken out from 1853 onwards but the first successful process, using a form of transfer-printing, was adopted for biscuit tins in 1868. An alternative process involving offset lithography, which was to become dominant and is still used today, was first patented in 1875. After acquisition by Bryant & May, the famous firm of match

Above. Figure 1. A selection of novelty biscuit tins including a desirable Crawford's airliner and a fine tin in the form of a Parisian delivery van. Note also the coronation coach from Jacobs and the French models of a railcar and the liner Normandie. An interloper is the hexagonal Lodge tin issued by Victory-V for confectionery rather than biscuits.

Left. Figure 2. A Huntley & Palmers Festal tin, c.1888; note the H & P monograms on the corners.





Figure 3. A Huntley & Palmers Sporting tin, c. 1889.

manufacturers, the rights passed in 1877 to Huntley, Boorne & Stevens, a related company of Huntley & Palmers, biscuit manufacturers of Reading, who were to become the most prolific issuer of decorative and novelty tins.

Huntley & Palmers issued around 400 different tin designs between 1868 and the outbreak of the Second World War, plus a significant number of variants, and it is perhaps not surprising that there are many collectors. Only a small selection can be illustrated here, with the Victorian period represented by four designs: Festal from 1888 (figure 2); Sporting from 1889 (figure 3); Fire Brigade from 1892 (figure 4); and Algerian from 1894 (figure 5). The Fire Brigade tin is eagerly sought by collectors of both tins and fire-fighting memorabilia, and similar dual desirability holds for quite a few designs, particularly some of the novelty shapes, occasionally resulting in unexpectedly high prices at auction. The shapes used for the Sporting and Algerian tins were issued with other printed scenes, and the complexity of the prominent cusps to the sides is a testament to the tin-maker's art.

At this period, Huntley & Palmers were typically introducing seven or eight tin designs each year, and this basic pattern continued into the Edwardian era and up to the First World War. Thereafter new designs emerged at a somewhat slower rate and the shapes tended to be less adventurous. Books were a popular early topic, represented here by three similar examples introduced between 1900 and 1903 (figure 6). The same shape was reintroduced in 1911 showing titles by Dickens, a variant



Figure 4. A Huntley & Palmers Fire Brigade tin, c. 1892.

which is much more difficult to find. Other multi-volume book shape tins were Bookstand (1905), Books (1909) and Stories (1910), and a single-volume Book tin was later made in two colour variants (1924 and 1930).

Bags or cases of various forms were also popular (figure 7), including several different handbags, suitcases, a satchel, wallet, field-glass case, hamper and even a fishing creel, again popular due to its wider appeal to collectors of fishing antiques. The range of other



Figure 5. A Huntley & Palmers Algerian tin, c. 1894.

subjects is far too wide to be covered here but is represented by an attractive design known as Shell with a scallop-shaped lid and printed mermaid scenes (figure 11), a decorative vase, a lantern, a bell and an Oriental screen (figure 8). All five of these tins date from the Edwardian heyday, being introduced between 1911 and 1913.

As a brief aside, Huntley & Palmers also issued containers in other materials, and an attractive set of twelve china chests of drawers were commissioned in 1905 from Royal Doulton, printed with different nursery rhyme scenes designed by Walter Cooper (figure 9). Another interesting non-tin container was a copy of the

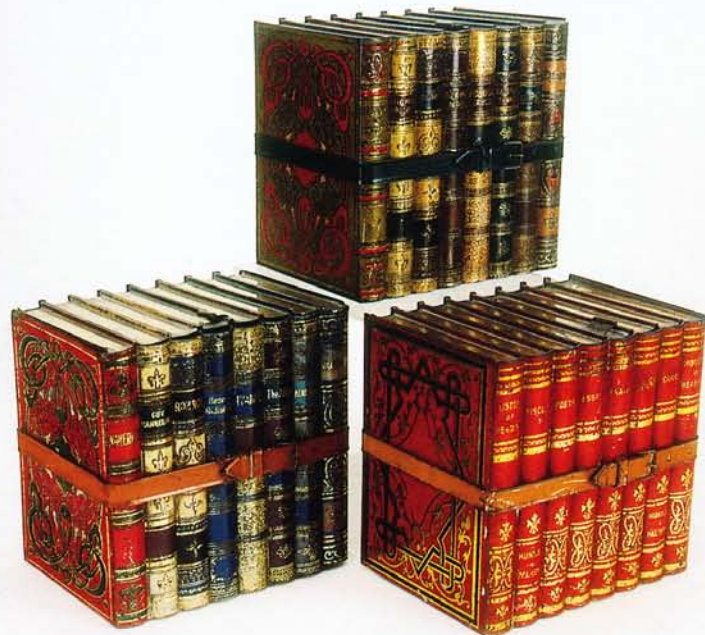


Figure 6. Three Huntley & Palmers book-shaped tins. (Top) Literature, 1901; (bottom left) Waverley, 1903; (bottom right) Library, 1900.



Figure 7. Five Huntley & Palmers bag or basket tins. (Left to right, top to bottom) Satchel, 1908; Field-Glass Case, 1907; Hamper, 1904; Creel, 1907; and Handbag, 1904.



Figure 8. Four Edwardian Huntley & Palmers tins. East & West, 1913; Lantern, 1911; Bell, 1912; and Screen, 1913.

FA Cup (figure 10), modelled in aluminium and made by N.C. Joseph Ltd of Stratford-on-Avon in two sizes, the smaller of which is the most common. It is thought that only a few copies of the larger size, as illustrated, were made for shop window displays around Reading. The inspiration for the design came when the local football team was expected to reach the cup final in 1927, but production proved to be a trifle premature when they were knocked out at the semi-

Figure 9. Two Huntley & Palmers china biscuit chests, decorated with nursery rhymes and made by Royal Doulton. The plate behind was made by the Brethby Art Pottery, complete with simulated biscuits.



final stage!

Huntley & Palmers were by far the most prolific issuer of tins, but most of the other biscuit firms followed suit. Although technically they could not make use of offset lithography before the Bryant & May patent expired in 1889, several firms issued early transfer-printed tins and thereafter a very wide range have appeared. Famous names encountered include Carr & Co, Crawfords, Jacobs, McVitie & Price, Macfarlane, Lang & Co, and Peek, Frean & Co.

Carr & Co are represented here by their attractive Art Box (figure 12), issued in 1924 but based on an earlier pewter box designed by Archibald Knox for Liberty. Like the FA Cup described above, this is not tin but was made from aluminium by N.C. Joseph Ltd. Its famous designer pedigree means, once again, competition from more than one group of collectors.

William Crawford & Sons were active in the Edwardian period and the three designs shown here (figure 13) are an ice cream vendor's cart called Hokey Pokey, a sundial and a leather jug. They also made the *Pride of London* airliner included in the group shot (figure 1), which is particularly desirable and usually makes four figures at auction if in good condition.

Four other manufacturers are represented in the next illustration (figure 14). The book was made by Peek, Frean & Co, the anvil by Macfarlane, Lang & Co,



Figure 10. A rare Huntley & Palmers FA Cup, made of aluminium in two sizes to mark the anticipated (but abortive) success of the company's home town, Reading football team in the 1927 competition.



Figure 11. A Huntley & Palmers Shell tin, c.1912.



Figure 12. A Carr & Co Art Box biscuit 'tin' (again made out of aluminium), issued in 1924 but based on an earlier design by Archibald Knox.

the Punch & Judy tent by McVitie & Price, and the pinball game by the Crumpsall & Cardiff Cooperative Society, one of several tins issued by various branches of the Co-op. Another McVitie & Price tin is a French-style ormolu-mounted chest-of-drawers known as Cabinette (figure 15). Tins in the shape of furniture were quite popular, with chests of drawers being fairly common, followed by bookcases and display cabinets, decorative tables, a cot, children in bed, a grandfather clock and even a kitchen stove!

Strangely enough, although intended as packaging for biscuits, some tins were considered desirable enough to be issued in their own boxes. This is particularly true of the more novel shapes such as vehicles. Two examples complete with their original boxes are shown here, the first is a fine Caravan Novelty by W. & R. Jacob & Co (figure 16). This firm also made the Coronation Coach Novelty (figure 1), again originally issued in a cardboard box, and a boxed Walnut Tea Caddy. The other tin with a box is by Macfarlane, Lang & Co in the form of a Wonderland Cottage (figure 17). They also issued a boxed watermill and a fine model of the LNER steam locomotive *Silver Link*. Other firms to issue special tins with boxes included Crawfords (a globe, a motor car, a Cunard Atlantic liner, and a



Figure 13. Three tins by William Crawford & Sons: Hokey Pokey (1916), Sundial (1926) and Leather Jug (1912).



Figure 14. Four tins by various manufacturers: Peek, Frean & Co's Book (1895), Crumpsall & Cardiff Cooperative Society's Pinball (which doubles as a toy game), Macfarlane, Lang & Co's Anvil (1911), and McVitie & Price's Punch & Judy (1905).



Figure 15. A chest of drawers tin by McVitie & Price, known as Cabinette (1933).



Figure 16. W. & R. Jacob & Co's Caravan Novelty tin (1937) complete with its original box.

model of the *Flying Scotsman* locomotive), Carr & Co (Dice Casket and a model of a lifeboat on its launching trolley), and, rather inevitably, Huntley & Palmers (a windmill, a perambulator, an inkstand, a delivery van, a boat and Ivory Box). Incidentally, cottage shapes were popular and it is well worth keeping an eye open for three tins made by Crawfords in the 1930s after designs by the popular children's artist Mabel Lucie Attwell.

The manufacture of biscuit tins was by no means a British monopoly. Many good novelty tins were made in continental Europe (and also in North America) although examples are inevitably uncommon in Britain. Two good individual examples are illustrated: a pile of Delft-style plates with the top plate forming the removable lid, made by Lefèvre-Utile (figure 18), and an impressive racing car by Biscuits

Gondolo (figure 20). Four others are included in the group shot (figure 1) – an Autorail Brun railcar and P'tit Brun boat, both from Switzerland, a Geslot & Voreux tin in the form of the French liner *Normandie*, and a rather fine small model of a Parisian delivery van.

Although biscuit tins are still produced, output since the Second World War has become rather stereotyped with most products sold in simple rectangular or circular tins, few of which offer much merit to collectors. However, one aberration which must be mentioned is a Huntley & Palmers tin made in 1980 with a printed garden tea party design in Kate Greenaway style (figure 19). Unfortunately, details in the design were surreptitiously altered, supposedly by a disgruntled employee, and the tin ended up with various rather rude elements such as a copulating couple, fornicating dogs and

a jamjar labelled with an expletive. The tins were recalled at the time but people in the know managed to keep samples and they do turn up occasionally. The example illustrated, complete with contents and still in original wrapping with label, sold for £167 last year but prices are erratic and I suspect others might fetch significantly more before too long.

When writing a brief article such as this, it is easy to concentrate on the more valuable items, but you do not need to be wealthy to collect biscuit tins. There are very many still available from a pound or two upwards, although the novelty shapes will always be expensive. As with any other collectable item, avoid poor quality and damage. Rust is inevitably a major problem, but do make allowance for the fact that many tins have survived because they are useful containers, quite often to be found lurking amongst tools or in garden sheds. Mint condition is unusual, but always get the best you can afford.

While biscuit tins feature regularly in collectors' sales up and down the country, significant collections appear infrequently. In 1995 Sotheby's sold the Scheer Collection of Biscuit and Decorative Tins with some 284 lots. A year later Christie's offered a particularly fine collection of Huntley & Palmers Biscuit Tins and Ephemera, and issued a catalogue which was expanded to serve also as a reference guide to the company's tins. In 1998 Dreweatt Neate had a comprehensive single-owner collection consisting of more than 200 lots, inevitably strong in Huntley & Palmers but extending to



Figure 17. Another rare survivor with its original box: this one Macfarlane, Lang & Co's Wonderland Cottage (1935).



Figure 18. A Lefevre-Utile Plates biscuit tin emulating a pile of Delft plates.



Figure 19. A Huntley & Palmers Kate Greenaway tin issued in 1980 but rapidly withdrawn due to various unauthorised 'alterations' in the printed scene.

various other manufacturers and including a selection of Continental tins. All three of these catalogues are well-illustrated and worthy of acquisition by any serious collector.

Fortunately, several good reference books are available. Two volumes which should be on every shelf are M.J. Franklin's *British Biscuit Tins 1868-1939*, first published in 1979 but recently re-issued, and Peter Hornsby's *Decorated Biscuit Tins* published in 1984. There are a few smaller books which might be of interest, particularly David Griffith's *Decorative Printed Tins – The Golden Age of Printed Tin Packaging* which extends beyond biscuits to other groceries, confectionery, cigarettes and tobacco, and also puts the tins into their historical context. Although outside the scope of this article, other tins are equally collectable and sometimes are just as decorative as the biscuit tins. One example must suffice – a garniture of three tins shaped as vases issued by the Don Confectionery Co (figure 21). As with a number of others, these were made by the specialist tin manufacturer Barringer, Wallis & Manners, one of several supplying tins to the grocery and confectionery trades.

A short article like this can do little more than serve as an introduction to a subject which is quite fascinating. The biscuit firms were pioneers in innovative packaging and spread their wings also to other marketing aids. Collectors can look out for small sample tins, enamel signs, cardboard display cards, almanacs and calendars, other ephemera

such as postcards and trade cards (like cigarette cards), catalogues, and novelties such as handbag mirrors in the form of biscuits, and even a piece of crested china shaped as a biscuit! Good hunting!

The photographs for this article have kindly been supplied by Dreweatt Neate,

auctioneers, and show tins they have sold at Newbury and Bristol.

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Left. Figure 20. A Biscuits Gondolo tin in the form of a racing car.



Figure 21. Three tins in the form of a garniture of vases, made for the Don Confectionery Company.