

What the Victorians Threw Away by Tom Licence, of the University of East Anglia
Saturday 6th February 2016 , 2.30pm at the Town Close Auditorium, Castle Museum,
Norwich.

Tom outlined the origin of his study, explained three examples of excavated sites, and work going on at present. It was illustrated with numerous photos of the places and the items revealed.

Up to the 1870s rural households dealt with waste in the old age fashion: scraps of food to animals; human excrement, organic rubbish and ash to the garden; combustibles burnt; solid items dumped in holes. Very little household property was thrown away until the era of mass consumption and packaging. With the advent of cheap household, ready-made products such as disposable glass bottles, ceramic pots, tins, and packets, large amounts were discarded into ground close to dwellings.

In 1933 The SCAPA Society For the Prevention of Disfigurement in Town and Country, published a study covering the disposal of domestic rubbish in rural area, mainly to prevent ugly tipping. 4000 questionnaires were sent out to Women's Institutes in 29 English and Welsh counties. About a quarter were returned, 37% of which reported individual disposal where each household made separate arrangements, dumping rubbish in woods, hedgerows, holes, lanes, quarries and commons. These were often scavenged by trespassers looking for bottles, jam jars, scrap metal, etc.

Tom's research stemmed from the premise that a throwaway society can be studied through its rubbish. The national statistical data of social reformers doesn't include rubbish which can be very informative about lifestyle. Communal dumps from towns and cities have been studied and are interesting but their contents are thrown together and depersonalised. Poorer rural families are not so well documented but individual pits at the bottom of country gardens contain only what a single family threw away and often these can be matched with real people from the census records to reconstruct daily life. Such assemblages or middens are a snapshot of material culture and status, a new source of information providing insights into individual households and lifestyles: diet, consumption of local and national branded products, health care and medicine, hardship, literacy, and childhood. Samples from different rural locations and different social settings had to be obtained relating to the era of mass marketing and packaging, the period roughly 1875 to 1914. So Tom set out to find the sorts of rubbish pits which had annoyed SCAPA. Between 2009 and 2012 three main sites were excavated.

1. A series of pits to the rear of labourers' cottages in Guston, Kent – deposits 1870 to 1920.
2. A pigsty patch of a Post Office in Marshbrook Shropshire, from 1910 onwards
3. A brick-lined cesspit of the privy at Hempstead Rectory near Stalham in Norfolk filled with rubble and domestic rubbish in 1895.

1. Pear Tree Cottage in Guston had three chalk pits filled with rubbish. The first from 1870s contained cheap utility items such as bottles, jugs, mugs, candle-sticks, wash bowls, pudding basins, dishes, plates, tea cups, chamber pots. The pottery items weren't porcelain but undecorated white plain ware, mocha 'branded ware and transfer printed ware, mostly in blue 'willow pattern'. These were used for mixing and cooking so easily broken, indeed there were so many broken pieces it suggested a clear out with a large quantity discarded in one go. There were quantities of limpet shells from the coast two miles away, plus pork and mutton bones.



Crockery from Guston



Children's nursery rhyme cups, dolls

The second pit, from the 1890s, was filled with many more bottles and tins, plates, cups and mugs— a large quantity of transfer printed crockery but no mocha ware material. Items relating to childhood such as dolls heads, animals, 'object lesson' and nursery rhyme cups - a set from the 1840s or 1850s, depicting verses such as 'This is the dog that worried the cat' – were most likely hand-me-downs or second-hand presents, kept until broken beyond repair then thrown away. Food packaging items contained sauces, pickles, jams and preserves but alcoholic drinks were not much in evidence no doubt because bottles were returned or beer collected in a jug from the pub. J.W. Court's 'Codd bottles' of fizzy drinks and six bottles of Foster Clark's 'Eifel Tower Fruit Juice' were found along with bottles for Liptons Tea and Patterson's Camp coffee. Bottles for ink, medicine and perfume and for whisky plus stoneware jars containing 'Glessen Blue' addition to washing clothes or bleach or blacking stove polish.

The third pit dating from the 1910s was more than nine feet deep with several rusty buckets of packaged products, less crockery (plain white or transfer printed in blue) but enamelled kitchen ware and many whole bottles, tins, cans and jars. Mixing and pudding bowls, jugs, plates, cups, saucers, egg-cups, basins, chamber and flower pots were all present plus ten zinc metal buckets, a bathtub, a giant kettle and ceramic containers, mainly jam and marmalade jars. Also tins of Cocoa or Golden Syrup, pots of Devonshire Clotted Cream, more J.W. Court and Foster Clark bottles, Dewars' and Buchanan whisky bottles. There was an absence of bottles for tea, coffee and sauces but forty machine made bottles of Bovril from 1913/14, tins of Colman's mustard, medicine bottles from Boots and Timothy White Ltd, and others for cough mixture and cold cream were found. Miscellaneous items included boot pattens, a meat hook, curtain rings, bone and mother of pearl buttons, plus Victorian military items such as badges and buttons.

2. The Old Post Office at Marshbrook in Shropshire. Originally two cottages, one a P.O. were rented from the Acton family by Mrs and Mrs Hayward in the 1890s then by Mr and Mrs Bird until 1910 and after 1912 by a Mr. Phillips. The garden had a pigsty and chicken run behind which was a hedge where all the owners dumped household waste. In 2011 Mr. Roger Acton allowed Tom to work on what was now a steep earthen bank containing many items similar to those found at Guston but also different products. Two distinct layers emerged: one light clay containing brick rubble and glass, crockery and a few intact utility bottles for wine, beer and vinegar, all from the late Victorian period; and above it a darker, crusty layer from the 1910s containing ash, rusty tins whole bottles and jars, crockery and buckets of miscellaneous rubbish, deposits from 1910-1920 by Mr. Phillips.

The P.O. was also a village store selling local produce, butter, sugar, and treacle. Reusable tins and jars for such products and reusable utility bottles for wine, beer and vinegar were found. Also Hartley jam and Keiller's transfer-printed ceramic jars for Dundee Marmalade and Patented glass preserving jars for bottled fruit with rubber rings and metal clamp on or screw lids; some broken inkwell bottles and a stoneware bottle for seltzer water imported from Passau in Bavaria; broken tea pots and cups in white, blue, grey, and red turned up but no stoneware bottles for blacking or blue; four Stephenson furniture cream bottles and Brasso tins, possibly used for a clean-up in 1910 -1912 of the fixtures and fittings in the P.O. Milk and cream was probably fetched etched from farms in jugs but cream could be brought in vase-like jars, two of which were found, plain with brown glaze. Evidence of eating habits came in the form of a pressed glass cake stand, a jelly mould, white pudding bowls plus bottles for brand sauces.

Only one Bovril and one Foster Clark bottle were found; Mr. Phillip obviously liked his beer. At the end of the C19th ,the Shrewsbury and Wem Brewery produced hand-finished, embossed, golden amber-coloured, half-pint bottles sealed with corks. After 1910 automated machines produced the same shape/design bottle but in green with a seam running up through the lip. Many such bottles, broken and intact, were found, the older ones having been refilled many times but not the newer ones which could have been returned. Marshbrooke's relative isolation probably made it less worthwhile to recycle or for children to scavenge and collect the deposit – the bottles were tipped. Thirty other branded beer bottles, local and national, were thrown away intact.



A 'Codd bottle' with a marble in its neck for carbonated beverages also came from the Shrewsbury & Wym Brewery but one oddity was a 'Seltzer' bottle incised with 'Ober-Selters, Nassau' from the Rhineland in Germany. Three egg-shaped bottles patented by William Hamilton and used by the nearby Stretton Hills Mineral Water Works and bottles for prepared medicines like 'Eno's salts' and 'Veno's Cough Cure' and 'Dinnerford's Magnesia' plus 'Kutnow's Powder' and 'Owbridge's Lung Tonic' turned up in the bank. Three stone inkwell bottles were found in the clayey layer; waste from the later 1910s included jars for Ponds and green glass containers for Boots toiletries but no intact utilitarian stoneware except for ginger beer bottles. A typical mixture of lamp flues and globes, flower pots, mixing bowls and pans, a kettle and a teaspoon accounted for the rest of the waste discarded over the hedge but further dumping had taken place along the edge of a track leading from the sty to the woods owned by the Acton family.

3. Hempstead Rectory near Stalham, Norfolk, was occupied 1895 to 1904 by Reverend John Francis Kendall who had a sizeable household of children, servants and live-in students. Originally there was a brick-built privy with a commodious cesspit, four feet square by five feet deep – this had been capped with linoleum and bricks to seal it off and turned into a flower bed. Perhaps concern about typhus led to flushing toilets replacing the privy and the cesspit being filled in. In December 2011 Tom was invited by the present owners, Ronnie and Jackie Pestell, to dig out this rubbish pit from the 1890s.



A fancy bisque doll's head, a child's bone toothbrush and a bottle for Mellin's Infant Food from the bottom of the pit, gave a likely date of 1895 for the tipping, although many other objects were from an earlier period. The privy contained between 90 and 120 smashed crockery including broken serving plates bearing a blue transfer-printed pattern, labelled 'Genevese' made between 1809 and 1834 in Burslem, and coalport cups for cocoa or tea dating between 1881 and 1891. Other plates, saucers, a washstand set, candlesticks, and eggcups dated from decades before. Some items had been dumped intact including a lidded ceramic sanitary bucket and a banded ware wine jug with a chipped spout and missing its pewter lid, a Mocha bowl which could have been repaired. There were a large number of packaging bottles and jars, so it looked as if there had been a clearance of old material, removing previous owners' left-overs.



Most of the crockery came from Staffordshire potteries with imported items such as a Chinese ginger jar, a Japanese enamelled saucer and fine china from Limoges. Hand-painted tableware white with decoration in gold leaf plus fancy tiles made by Wedgwood in 1878 sold as 'The months', had been discarded as had flower vases and pressed-glass moulded drinking cups and beakers in shades of green.

Two cups from J.G.Pike, confectioner and caterer in Red Lion St. Norwich, were found which suggests the Kendall's threw parties to entertain children and guests. Extra cups and saucers could be hired and inevitably some of these were broken. Also twenty-three bottles for powdered fruit juices were recovered: of these nineteen came from DE Carle & Son, Norwich and two were Foster Clark. Eleven egg-shaped fizzy drinks bottles from Caley & Son of Norwich, dated before 1898 and one from Steward Patteson Finch & Co. of Norwich, came from the bottom of the cesspit. Unlike at Marshbrook there was little evidence of alcohol consumption except for an intact wine bottle, several broken ones, a smashed decanter and glasses plus a metal hip flask for spirits. As at Guston and Marshbrook, beer and milk may have been fetched in jugs and bottled re-used/recycled.

The cesspit collection included pots from Blanchflower & Sons, Yarmouth, for meats and fish; tins for Colman's mustard; a Sprudel Salts bottle with Carlsbad embossed on it; glass preserves Kilner jars; ceramic jars for marmalade and jam; numerous types of bottles for medicine, perfume, blacking, furniture cream, glue, ink, chutney, pickles. honey, olives, sauces, mineral waters, ginger beer, even Mango chutney and Bombay Relish.

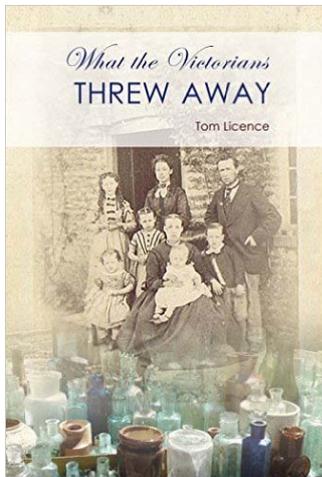


Sanitary bucket, broken crockery, stone and glass bottles found at bottom of cesspit

Tom is presently investigating part of a common rubbish dump at Castle Rising village already scavenged. Also a Farm near Felixstowe as well as identifying historic land-fill sites as at King's Lynn and Diss ,for archiving and recording. There is a Web-site, with a data base of photos <http://www.whatthevictorianssthrewaway.com>. and a regular blog and twitter account. The Centre for East Anglian Studies intends to display some of the items discovered. Tom had brought several trays of bits and pieces for the audience to look at and handle.

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The President, Sophie Cabot, thanked Tom for an interesting and enjoyable talk which then elicited numerous contributions from the audience many of them childhood reminiscences about old wine bottles and jam jars being kept for use or salvaged. One question was about the 'Codd bottles' with balls or marbles which children obtained by breaking the bottles open Tom said these were made into the 1920s and 1930s before they ceased although evidently still used in Japan. Fizzy drink bottles were filled under pressure and the marble rose up the spout of the bottle to the rubber ring thus creating an air tight seal. Other bottles had clipped-on, internal screw stoppers. Although returnable bottles with a money back deposit are still used in Germany these had disappeared in Britain. Asked about card and paper packaging, Tom said this had increased a lot since the 1880s and some does survive but often damaged, rotten or burnt. Anecdotal examples were given by members of the audience: one Gentleman remembered collecting jam jars during the 1950s; another that a shop in Ber St, Norwich purchased old newspapers; another that a similar shop in Barracks St. used to pay children for jars and corona bottles; someone remembered a large cache of Bovril jars and pre-war bottles in a local pond; and it was mentioned that in 1942 when people were forced to leave the Merton Estate (now the Stanta Battle Area) they buried items in cupboards and chests hoping to return after WWII – many such caches could still be there waiting to be unearthed.



What the Victorians Threw Away by Tom Licence; softback by Oxbow Books; A5 size 110 pages - £9.99

Edmund G. Perry
Hon.Gen.Secretary
NNAS