

Clay Tobacco Pipes

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Pipes made of clay were first used in England after the introduction of tobacco from the Americas in the late sixteenth century. The native peoples of North America had used smoking as parts of important rituals for centuries before this. Sir Walter Raleigh was one of the first to promote this habit in England, though at first, it met with hard opposition. Once smoking did begin to catch on, only the rich in England could afford tobacco which was imported and taxed.

Tobacco smoking spread quickly despite tracts appearing against smoking, one such from none other than King James VI and I, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the manufacture of clay pipes to meet the growing demand for smoking was a well-established trade. A company of pipemakers was set up in London in 1619. Provincial manufacture of pipes also began in the early seventeenth century and by the 1650s York and Bristol had pipemakers' guilds. The Gateshead pipemakers' guild, established in 1675, sold pipes across much of north-east England and into Scotland.¹ A wide variety of clays were used for manufacture, those on coalfields were particularly suitable.² Most production was for local markets but there was also an export trade. Staffordshire pipes for example were taken down the Severn and from there onto London and even the Americas.³ The industry reached its peak by about 1680-1700 when almost every town and city in England had pipe makers, at which point it is estimated that millions were being produced.⁴

Around 1720 a huge industrial decline took place due to conflict in Europe and America. Snuff became popular with the upper sorts, replacing smoking, which was also discouraged because of health risks. Clay pipes came back into fashion again in the nineteenth century however, following industrial revival and population growth. At this point English, Dutch, French, and German designers competed for attention in a world market where production was also elevated to a grand form of art.⁵

¹ David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 98.

² David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 98.

³ David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 98.

⁴ Heather Coleman, '[A Short History Of Clay Pipes](#)' - [Pipedia](#)

⁵ Heather Coleman, '[A Short History Of Clay Pipes](#)' - [Pipedia](#)



Clay pipe found while mudlarking on the River Thames, London © Anna Cusack

Almost every aspect of everyday life was celebrated on a clay pipe including: plants, animals, birds, Coats of Arms, Royal events, names of Inns, Masonic symbolism, sporting events, advertising, heads of celebrities and even characters from mythology.⁶

By the 1930s the demand for clay pipes had reduced once again with changes in society and competition from the cigarette. In the modern-day smoking has again declined while the clay pipe has been reduced to a rare novelty by consumers.

⁶ Heather Coleman, '[A Short History Of Clay Pipes](#)' - Pipedia



Clay pipe found while mudlarking on the River Thames, London © Anna Cusack

In the modern day, clay pipes are incredibly useful and interesting to the historian who may come across pipe fragments when fieldwalking, mudlarking or deposited in a museum. Long pipes were used for a cooler smoke, but also broke more easily so they were often thrown away on the spot after use.⁷ Pipes were often sold ready-packed for single use before being discarded, the cigarettes of their day. The presence (or absence) of clay tobacco pipes is an important aid in dating archaeological sites at the end of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when tobacco smoking was first introduced to Britain.⁸ The changing styles and decorations of pipes also provide broad dating for later periods. Many pipes can be dated by makers' marks by the mid-seventeenth century. The size of the pipe bowl increased over the decades to allow more tobacco to be consumed which allows them to be dated.

⁷ Heather Coleman, '[A Short History Of Clay Pipes](#)' - [Pipedia](#)

⁸ David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 98.

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from Heather Coleman's, '[A Short History Of Clay Pipes](#)' - [Pipedia](#). The site contains a wealth of information on pipes and their history.

For more than 40 years the University of Liverpool has been the focal point for clay tobacco pipe research in this country and, since 1993, it has housed the National Pipe Archive:
<http://www.pipearchive.co.uk/index.html>

David Crossley, *Post-Medieval Archaeology* (1990)

Edward Fletcher, *Clay Pipes* (1977)

David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996),

Joanne Sear and Ken Sneath, *The Origins of the Consumer Revolution in England: From brass pots to clocks* (2020)