

ELABORATELY UP TO SNUFF

by HUON MALLALIEU



DURING the acrimonious take-over battle which raged around the British-American Tobacco Company during 1989, it was often said that the firm was particularly vulnerable because it had diversified too much into areas unconnected with its traditional activities. At least one of its recent ventures, however, could never be criticised on that score.

For the past nine or 10 years, relying on the expertise of the Bond Street porcelain dealer Deborah Gage, the company has been putting together a collection of tobacco containers and accessories. As well as ceramics, there are pipes and snuffboxes, and an impressive accumulation of early cigarette packets and 20th-century paraphernalia. But at the core of the collection is a group of earlier jars and boxes of types whose original functions had often been forgotten, even by porcelain experts.

Some of them are lidded cylinders with two applied porcelain straps on the side, to hold a spoon. These have been variously described as toilet jars, pomade pots or even jam jars, despite the obvious drawback that a used spoon replaced in the straps would dribble stickiness on itself and the table. Others come singly or in pairs, fitted in wooden, silk-lined cases, and many have lead tampers forming an inner lid. Inevitably it has sometimes been assumed that these were caddies and canisters for tea, a misapprehension strengthened by the fact that the wooden cases normally lock. But they were for tobacco or snuff.

Of course tea was an expensive commodity, but so, often, was tobacco, and in some cases, such as the "white jars or square boxes for tobacco or tea" listed by the Doccia factory in 1760, the containers served a dual purpose. Some snuff-takers, Queen Charlotte among them, added green tea to their snuff—in her case, Violet Strasburg, a mixture of rappee, bitter almonds, ambergris and attarjul.

Many of these jars represent an intermediate stage in the ceremonial of snuff-taking, while the larger, sometimes rectangular containers are for keeping pipe tobacco moist. Snuff would be bought ready mixed and ground from the tobacconist, or else grated with a rasp from a "carotte" or stick of tobacco at home. In either case it would be stored in an air-tight jar, and the spoon used to transfer it to individual snuffboxes. In general, pipe-smoking was more popular in the Protestant north of Europe, and snuff-taking in the Catholic south. The English seem to have preferred cool, moist tobacco, by contrast to the smokers of the Continent, and so many English containers are made from lead or enamel.

The spoons that came with many of the jars might be of silver, gold or ivory, as well as porcelain. They were not only for filling snuffboxes, but for stirring the contents of the jar from time to time to encourage fermentation. In the accounts of Messrs Fribourg & Treyer for 1801 are the entries: "Paid Mr Nichells for making a very neat



(Top) 1—Sèvres tobacco jar and cover. Dated 1767. 6in high. (Above) 2—St Cloud tobacco jar and cover, c1735-38, with original lead liner. 5.75in. Chantilly tobacco jar, c1735, with kakiemon decoration showing a tobacco plant. 4.75in

At the centre of the British-American Tobacco Company's remarkable accumulation of tobacco and snuff containers and accessories are some items of a type that have confused collectors for years, having been mistakenly described as pomade pots or jam jars.



3—Rare DuPaquier rectangular casket and liner, c1720. Hard-paste porcelain, 6.5in by 14.75in. In a contemporary fitted case

case for 4 Jars, double linked Lock, stop hinges brass lifting handles, lined with fine red leather . . . £1.18s. Paid Mr Nichells for making a deal case to the above . . . 2s.6d. A small spoon . . . 1s.”

When smoking (or “drinking tobacco”) was indulged in in polite society, it, too, had its elegant rituals. The rectangular tobacco boxes would be placed on a table for all to partake of them. Many were elaborate, like the one noted in J.J. Kändler’s daybook for July 1735 (he was artistic director at the Meissen factory): “Finished one large tobacco box (for smoking) complete with cover decorated with numerous reliefs and ornaments, also made to accompany the box, a decorated tray into which the ash may be tipped.”

Various entries in the Sèvres archives for the 1770s and ’80s refer to *1 pot à tabac et soucoupe*, which presumably had the same function. The complete smoker would be equipped with his or her individual “tabagie”, described in 1727 as *une sorte de petite cassette dans laquelle on serre du tabac, des pipes, et tout ce qui est nécessaire pour fumer*. The necessities might well include small candlesticks, tobacco stoppers in the form of “maiden’s legs”, and porcelain spittoons.

Tabagies could be simple and portable or more sophisticated and intended for the drawing room, such as one advertised in the late 18th century: *Une jolie tabagie de marbre vert campan contenant quatre livres de tabac, avec tous ses utensils; pris au juste, 30 livres*. In 19th-century England a wider market was sought for a ceramic smoker’s set which became known as “the Bargee’s Companion”. This was a set of pots fitting together in a column topped by a candlestick. From the bottom upwards, the component parts were a spittoon, a tobacco jar containing a weight, which might be a screw-topped snuffbox, a lid which served as an ashtray, a goblet, and the candlestick, perhaps with a snuffer.

As almost every gardener and anyone who has ever mudlarked on the foreshore of the tidal Thames knows, clay pipes were made by the million from the 17th to the late 19th centuries. Shapes and lengths changed over the years, and sometimes the bowls were elaborately moulded, but in general they were regarded as disposable. Hence, the many fragments which, together with

shards of mass-produced pottery, were dug into heavy soils to aerate gardens. Particular concentrations in the Thames mud usually mark the stands of the old watermen, where they waited for custom like cabs at a rank. Although, by the 19th century, the cigar and the cigarette were dethroning the pipe in genteel circles, in the 18th century upper-class smokers were also catered for by the porcelain manufactories.

At Meissen, Kändler devised a number of novel pipe heads with floral decorations, modelled as the heads of beauties or hussars, or in the form of recumbent dogs. These last are charming Rococo conceits, with hinged heads and pierced ears to let air in when the heads are closed. A few of these, among them one of the most recent additions to the BAT collection, are modelled as pug dogs. There may be more to these than there seems. After the Papal Excommunication and Anathema pronounced on freemasons in 1738, many masons at the Catholic courts used still more esoteric signs of recognition than their Protestant confrères. The pug was one of them.

Photographs: The British-American Tobacco Company collection, by courtesy of Deborah Gage (Works of Art) Ltd.