EAT

Apollo
Feb 1949

COLLECTING OLD TOBACCO STOPPERS

BY RONALD F. MICHAELIS

IN comparison with some of the more beaten paths of collecting very little appears to be known of the fascination surrounding tobacco stoppers, or pipe stoppers to give them their more familiar title. Little also appears to have been written about them, taking into consideration the fact that they have been in almost general use among smokers for something more than three hundred years.

Pipe stoppers, in common with most other inventions, originated by necessity. In the days when tobacco smoking in Europe first became "fashionable" and was adopted by the gentlemen of the courts of Spain, France and England, pipe bowls were made much smaller and narrower than they are to-day, consequently it was necessary to devise some object small enough in circumference to enter the bowls so that the tobacco could be evenly distributed down the length of the bowl, and not rammed tightly at the top, as would be the case, in all probability, by merely pressing down the tobacco with the forefinger—to say nothing of an occasionally burned finger-tip !—when the burning tobacco or hot ashes required condensing.

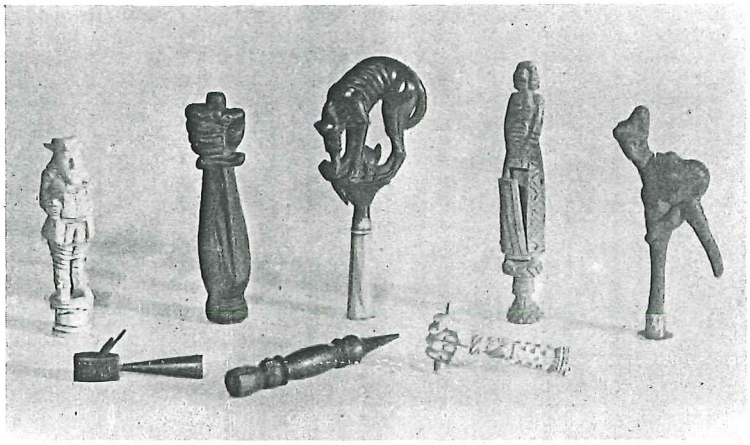

Fig. I. A selection of carved stoppers in ivory, wood, horn and bone.

The use of such an implement continues even to this day, but the modern counterpart of the old stopper is essentially a multi-purpose article consisting of a stopper, a pick and a rasp to scrape away hardened crust from the inside of the bowl, and sometimes other small "tools" for performing all the requirements necessary to ensure a trouble-free smoke.

Despite the prevalence of pipe smoking it is surprising how many persons there are, not excluding antique dealers, who do not know even what is meant by the term "tobacco stopper."

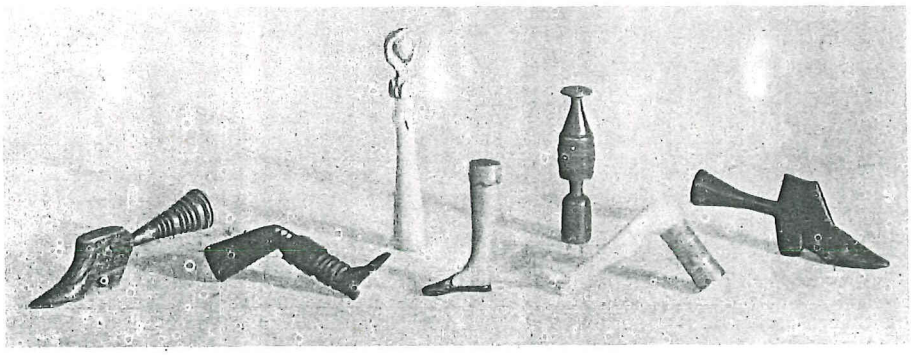

Fig. II. A representative range of more common types, in brass, wood and ivory.

The writer has received many blank looks from dealers greeting the request for such objects in curio and antique shops, although on rare occasions, where least expected, a dealer will produce an odd specimen or two and remark, "Yes—I have had these for years. I never get asked for them now," or he may vouchsafe the information that he "thought they were seals !"

Examples of old stoppers are found in a variety of materials suitable for carving, such as wood, bone, ivory, horn, mother-of-pearl and, in fact, in anything which would lend itself to being modelled into the requisite object. Porcelain and pottery stoppers, although rare, are known.

Amongst the metals brass, bronze, copper, iron, steel, pewter and silver have been used : one writer mentions that even gold examples are known, but the author has never come across such a specimen, although gold (and gold mounted) *seals* are frequently met with.

Many stoppers made in bone, wood and ivory have been mounted with silver, sometimes for decorative purposes only but more generally the mount is placed at the flat (or stopper) end to protect the more delicate material from charring by constant contact with burning tobacco.

Stoppers made from the more enduring materials such as metal are, naturally, more easily found to-day, but plenty of other types have been, and doubtless will continue to be, unearthed in out-of-the-way secondhand and antique dealers' establishments.

In total length pipe stoppers may vary from about $1\frac{1}{2}$ ins. to $4\frac{1}{2}$ ins. overall. The diameter of the flat end of the stem may usually be taken as an indication of the age of the piece ; generally speaking the earliest being not more than $\frac{5}{16}$ or, at most, $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch across at the widest part. The sizes of the stoppers tended to increase as larger pipe bowls became more widely used.

It is sometimes difficult to decide whether a particular item was originally intended for use as a pipe stopper or as a seal. The use of sealing-wax was, at one time, far more in vogue than it is now, and a very similarly shaped article served the purpose of compressing the wax impression.

Where seals bore engraved designs, crests or initials these would be engraved *in reverse*, and this fact is, often enough, the only indication of their intention for use for that purpose. In either case, whether, in fact, seals or pipe stoppers, the pieces are generally worth retaining for their artistic merit or old associations.

The craftsmen who made the earlier models used their ingenuity in the manufacture of such small and decorative instruments as would serve their purpose, and many of the earliest are unique.

The increasing interest in these useful items was quickly appreciated by those with a commercial instinct and thus many of the later types were turned out in large numbers, particularly those in brass, which could be easily moulded.

Some of these brass stoppers, although produced in comparatively large numbers, are, nevertheless, still very desirable but, unfortunately, the modern faker has not left this field unturned and, consequently, most of the brass stoppers found on the market to-day are reproductions of earlier types, or are entire figments of imagination having no relationship to earlier types ; needless to say, these have little or no collectable value.

Genuine old stoppers may usually be identified by the workmanship in their composition ; the earlier models, although perhaps crude in design and workmanship, usually show some indisputable artistic merit and individuality. For instance, a carpenter or woodworker would naturally design one, having the "stopper" end small enough to do its work effectively but, as is usual in a craftsman

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with any artistic ability at all, would embellish his stopper with a fancy design or, perhaps, carve it into the shape of a favourite tool or familiar object.

An example is shown in Fig. I, the first piece in the bottom row being delicately carved in hardwood in the form of a miniature plane, with adjustable blade and detachable slide, and is, in fact, a perfect working model. This particular stopper has been acclaimed by some as the gem of the collection.

An attempt has been made to date and describe some of the specimens illustrated here: information may, in some cases, be merely conjectural, but a genuine effort has been made to ensure accuracy of description or period wherever possible.

Fig. I shows a good range of uncommon stoppers. Of the standing pieces No. (i) is of carved ivory, depicting a soldier or privateer, probably Dutch, *circa* 1700, in the costume of the period. (ii) a hand grasping a dagger or sword, carved in hardwood; this is probably an allegorical representation of the legend of King Arthur's magic sword "Excalibur" rising from the lake. (iii) a sporting subject of Hound and Hare, beautifully carved in boxwood,

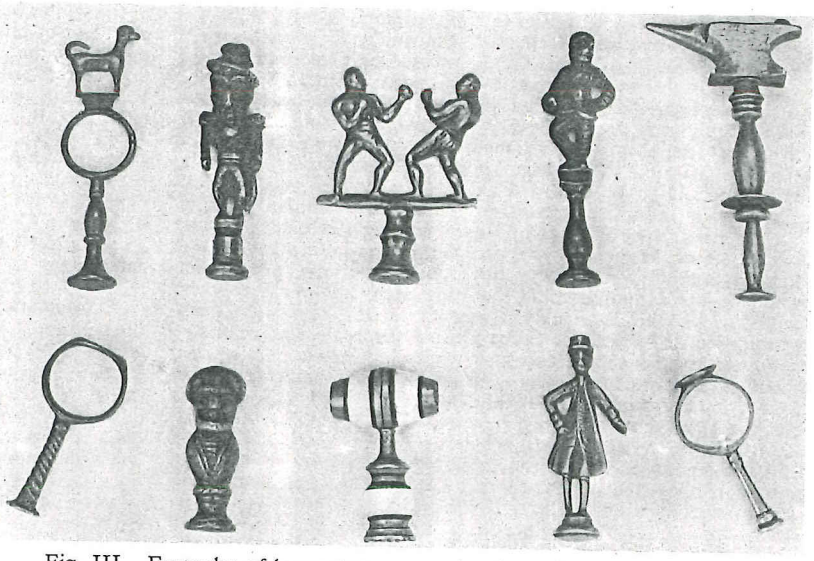

Fig. III. Examples of brass stoppers ranging from about 1740 to 1820.

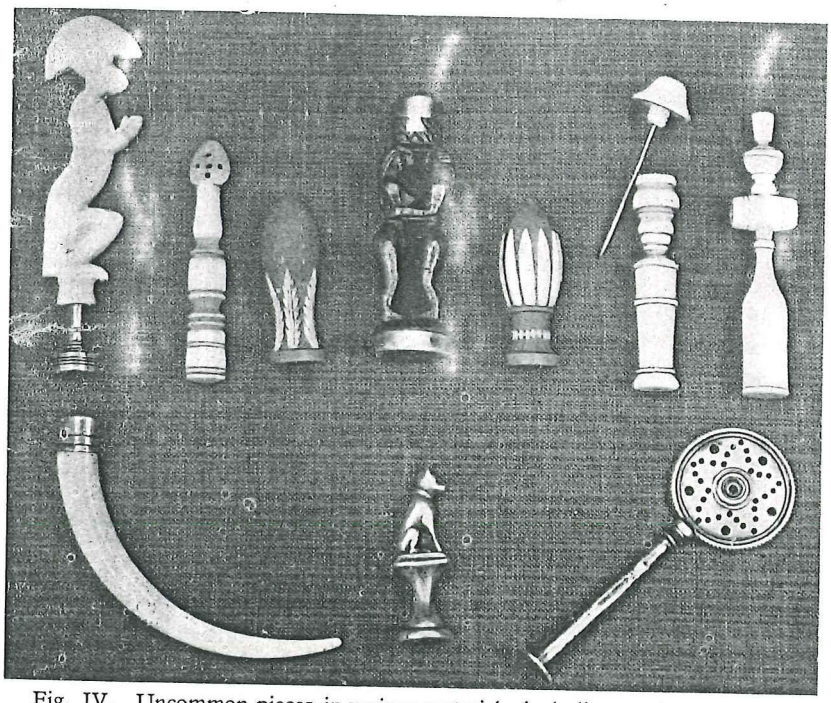

Fig. IV. Uncommon pieces in various materials, including mother-of-pearl, horn, ivory, silver, pewter and Wedgwood ware. The first item in the bottom row is a silver-mounted boar's tusk.

mounted with silver, *c.* 1800. This design is also known in ivory and in brass, with minor variations. (iv) a figure of an ecclesiastic, probably of the ill-fated Dr. Sacheverell, carved from antler horn. This piece is particularly interesting in that it has a concealed cavity, almost indistinguishable when closed, used for some purpose which escapes the writer, for the cavity is too small to have been used for snuff.

An early piece, probably *c.* 1710. (v) a unique stopper, cut from a piece of natural root, bearing a silver mount.

This has, doubtless, been selected by the maker on account of the striking resemblance to a clenched hand holding a pipe, examples of which are among the more common designs. The workmanship in the silver mount indicates the XVIIth century as the probable period of manufacture.

In the front row the first piece is the plane already described, next to which is a finely turned stopper in ebony; the pointed end farthest from the camera would be used for digging down into the pipe bowl for loosening tobacco.

The last piece in this illustration depicts a hand holding a rod, a variant of a common type. This is carved in bone.

Practically everything in everyday use, and many notabilities, both real and fictional, have been portrayed by the makers of pipe stoppers down the ages. Amongst the statuettes and busts will be found Britannia, Punch, Shakespeare, Cromwell, Napoleon and hosts of others, too numerous to mention.

Models of a hand holding a pipe, or of a leg, shoe or boot are, undoubtedly, the most common of all, being easy subjects for the artist to reproduce.

Fig. II shows a representative range of these latter types: No. (i) being in brass, finely engraved, probably of French XIXth century manufacture. (ii) a leg and top-boot, carved in hardwood, with inset ivory buttons to the knee breeches. (iii) an ivory hand holding a ball. (iv) a leg in ivory, with a boxwood slipper neatly riveted to the foot, with a silver mount capping the stopper end. (v) a composite design of a barrel, a bottle and a glass in brass. This design is known with variations in the shapes of the items which comprise the whole; the shape of the glass being the truest indication of the age of the piece. (vi) an ivory leg, silver mounted; the boot is of the type worn in the late Stuart period. (vii) a boot in mahogany, a variation of the first item in the illustration.

Fig. III. This illustration shows various brass stoppers, ranging in period from about 1740 to 1820. No. (i) combines the ring stopper with a statuette of a dog. No. (ii) is a grotesque caricature of the Duke of Wellington: this may well have been made in France, during the years 1815-1818, when the Duke was in command of the international army of occupation.

His popularity waned in that sphere and attempts were even made to assassinate him. No. (iii) portrays Tom Cribb, champion boxer of England between the years 1809-1821, and Tom Molineux, the negro, whom he narrowly beat on their first meeting at East Grinstead on December 10th, 1810, and thoroughly beat on the second occasion, some months later at Thistleton Gap, near Grantham. Cribb went into retirement about 1821, having been beaten only once in his career—by George Nicholls, in July, 1805. He died in 1848. Tom Hazel wrote a stanza to him after his victory over the negro as follows:

"A true Briton from Bristol, a rare one to fibb,

He's champion of England, his name is Tom Cribb
With white and black men, has mill'd all round
But one to mill him in the world can't be found."

No. (iv) is probably depicting some fictional character of *c.* 1780. No. (v) is a beautifully executed anvil and baluster in heavy, hand-made brass and is one of the finest pieces in the collection. (vi) and (x) are ring stoppers; a contemporary use of which type can be seen in Hogarth's "Modern Midnight Conversation." Here a clergyman, said to be Parson Ford, Dr. Johnson's uncle, in full canonicals, is seen sitting before a punch-bowl smoking a long churchwarden pipe, and bearing upon his finger just such a ring stopper. Each of the ring stoppers shown has initials cut on the short flat section which forms the front of the ring to proclaim ownership; these initials could also have been used as a seal when required. No. (vii) is an early representation of Punch. No. (viii) is composed of sections of brass, iron and ivory, placed consecutively, and riveted together to form a pleasing whole. This piece is just as likely to have been a seal, if one may judge from the cross-hatching which is cut into the base. No. (ix) is of a Quaker, in conventional garb, possibly depicting George Fox, their leader.

Fig. IV (top row). No. (i) is delicately carved from mother-of-pearl and shows an ape in the costume of a courtier or soldier; probably of Russian workmanship. The mount is of silver, and has a semi-precious stone set in the base.

No. (ii) is a bone snuff-spoon with pipe stopper end, and is possibly of XVIIIth century date. Nos. (iii) and (v) are both in blue-ground Wedgwood ware, with applied white cameo decoration, and are reputed to have been made for the Great Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park in 1851.

No. (iv) is an early carved specimen in hardwood, mounted with pewter at both top and bottom, the lower and larger end probably intended for use as a seal and the smaller end as a stopper. A male and a female figure are depicted. The man is wearing a periwig, tied at the back, in the style of the early XVIIIth century. No. (vi) is of ivory, having a steel shaft contained in the body for loosening tobacco in the pipe bowl or for picking small particles from the stem. (vii) is also of ivory and shows the barrel, bottle and glass *motif* which was frequently used. The base of the bottle unscrews, disclosing a cavity containing two miniature gaming dice.

In the bottom row is shown a boar's tusk, mounted in silver, next to which is a pewter piece depicting a dog seated on a pedestal. The last item is of silver. The disc unscrews from the barrel and has attached to it a steel shaft similar to that shown in the ivory specimen immediately above.

There is no doubt that smokers took a very great pride in their pipe stoppers in the past. It was fashionable to be able to display a stopper cut from a piece of wood from this or that historical object, just as snuff-takers would flourish a unique snuff box, made from the timbers, possibly, of a famous galleon, or possessing some equally romantic history.

This reminds one of the remark of John Taylor, the Water Poet, made in his "Wandering to see the Wonders of the West," 1669, upon having seen the famous Glastonbury Thorn, which the monks at that place had celebrated for its miraculous flowering at Christmas time, and which was cut down by the Parliamentary soldiers. He says, "I saw the sayd branch, I did take a dead sprigge from it, wherewith I made two or three tobacco stoppers, which I brought to London." One may also read in the *Spectator* of the remark made by Sir Roger de Coverley, when viewing the Coronation Chairs in Westminster Abbey: ". . . If Will Wimble were with us, and saw those two chairs, it would go hard but he would get a tobacco stopper out of one or t'other of them."

This quest for suitable material from which to carve his pipe stoppers was the cause of much uneasiness and trouble for poor Will Wimble, for the "Spectator" himself, having encountered Sir Roger whilst out walking, says, ". . . He then proceeded to acquaint me with the welfare of Will Wimble. Upon which he put his hand into his fob and presented me in his name with a tobacco stopper, telling me that Will had been busy all the beginning of the winter in turning great quantities of them; and that he made a present of one to every gentleman in the country who has good principles, and smokes. He added, that poor Will was at present under great tribulation, for that Tom Touchy had taken the law of him for cutting some hazel sticks out of one of his hedges." (January 8th, 1712.)

In the British Museum may be seen a small collection of early stoppers, amongst which will be found one in the form of a heart, the inscription upon it indicating that it was made from the Royal oak tree in which King Charles II is said to have hidden during his flight from Cromwell's army in 1651.

It is to be regretted that, of the many old stoppers that have come down to us, the history of the early associations of most of them has been lost in obscurity.

Readers may be interested in a poetical essay by James Boswell, the celebrated biographer of Johnson, which appeared in the *Shrubs of Parnassus*, published in 1760. This essay is curiously descriptive of many of the pipe stoppers in use at that time:

"Oh! let me grasp thy waist, be thou of wood,
Or laevigated steel, for well 'tis known
Thy habit is diverse. In iron clad
Sometimes thy feature roughens to the sight;
And oft transparent art thou seen in glass,
Portending frangibility. The son
Of labouring mechanism here displays
Exuberance of skill. The curious knot,
The motley flourish winding down thy sides,
And freaks of fancy pour upon the view
Their complicated charms, and as they please,
Astonish. While with glee thy touch I feel
No harm my finger dreads. No fractured pipe
I ask, or splinter's aid, wherewith to press
The rising ashes down. Oh! bless my hand,
Chief when thou com'st with hollow circle, crown'd
With sculptured signet, bearing in thy womb
The treasured corkscrew. Thus a triple service
In firm alliance may'st thou boast."

If one takes the trouble to analyse the above few lines it will be seen that wood, steel, iron and *glass* are all mentioned as media from which stoppers were produced before 1760.

Examples in the first three materials are well known, but the writer has never come across an *authentic* early specimen in glass. Glass pestles or sugar-crushers have been claimed by some to be tobacco stoppers and, indeed, look suspiciously like them, but the discerning collector will disregard them as objects unworthy of inclusion in his pipe stopper collection.

The stopper mentioned in the final lines, i.e. "the hollow circle, crown'd with sculptured signet" is similar to the ring stoppers shown in Fig. III. Stoppers containing corkscrews are not confined to the ring type. In the writer's collection is a silver specimen, 3½ ins. long, which unscrews at the top, disclosing a corkscrew; the small stopper-end also unscrews and is found to be attached to a steel spike for loosening tobacco.

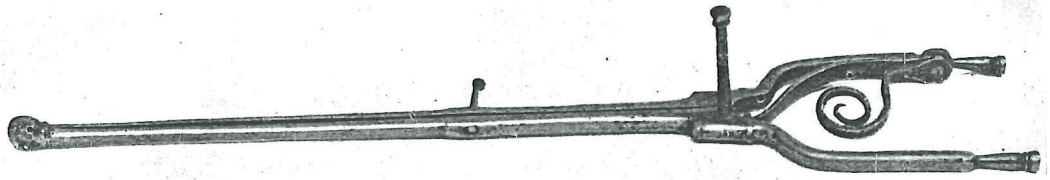

Fig. V. Early XVIIIth century steel smokers' tongs incorporating three tobacco stoppers.

It is not, by any means, generally known that the long smokers' tongs were frequently embellished with tobacco stoppers. The tongs themselves were used for selecting a burning ember from the fire; this was then held, at arm's length, over the bowl of the long churchwarden pipe while the smoker puffed until the tobacco was well alight. Such tongs vary in length from a pocket size to about 18 ins.

These implements were usually kept hanging on the wall, or in the inglenook, of taverns in the XVIIth century for the use of their customers. Some tongs are known to have a whistle incorporated in the handle, with which the bibulous might summon "mine host" to refill the tankards of ale.

There is a particularly fine pair of steel smokers' tongs in the collection of the Guildhall Museum, London. A drawing of these appears in Mr. J. Seymour Lindsay's book *Iron and Brass Implements of the English House*, published by the Medici Society. The tongs

are scissors-shaped, and the two handle terminals are finished off with flat-ended presses for the tobacco, one having a screw-thread which, upon being withdrawn, discloses a spike for pricking down into the pipe bowl.

Steel was the principal agent from which smokers' tongs were produced, although specimens in brass are known to exist; most of the latter, however, were made without pipe stoppers.

Some tongs have the central pivot extended to a length of about 1½ ins. from the body, whilst others have an additional piece of metal welded to the side; both for use as stoppers. It is not unusual to find engraved dates upon these pieces; the dates generally ranging between the years 1650 and 1720. Such pieces are a creditable addition to any collection.

A good example of steel smokers' tongs, embodying three pipe stoppers, is shown at Fig. V. These are 17½ ins. in length. The small projection to be seen lying near the centre of the prongs is not a stopper but is there for the sole purpose of keeping the two fingers rigid when open.

All the pieces illustrated are from the author's collection, which has been built up over the last 25 years, for the most part piece by piece, by the acquisition of single specimens, the amassing of which has been a source of constant pleasure to their owner in the process.

If there are any other collectors of these relics of the past, whose eyes should chance to light on these few words, the writer would be pleased to hear from them with the object of comparing specimens or corresponding generally on the subject.

Letters may be addressed c/o the Editor of this journal.

GLASS THROUGH THE AGES. By E. Barrington Haynes. (Penguin Books Ltd. Price 2s.)

THE book is presented in the double volume form and contains 240 pages of reading and a 64-page section of excellent photogravure illustrations, depicting nearly 300 glasses dating from the fifth century B.C. to modern times.

The history of glass is traced in an interesting and attractive style from its earliest beginnings and is summarised in what the author describes as a bird's-eye view. When history itself became confused it is not surprising that the story of a minor art should be obscured and the author is to be congratulated upon his efforts to present a connected version of the phases of glass-making following the dark period when Roman power no longer sufficed to maintain the borders of its Empire.

Chapters are devoted to such subjects as the "Decorative Techniques," "Jacobite Glasses," in which the Horridge Theory is elaborated, "Commemorative Glasses," and to "Glassmaking in England." The subject of Irish glass is, however, not considered of sufficient importance to receive even a sub-title and is dismissed in little more than a page. This comes as a surprise to the reader when he compares the space in the early chapters devoted to a period when history was obscure and from which no specimens have survived.

The final section of the book (about 100 pages) gives a very thorough classification of XVIIIth century drinking glasses which have passed through the hands of Messrs. Arthur Churchill Ltd. The present classification is based on that used fifty years ago by Hartshorne and extended and amended by later writers such as Bate, Francis and Thorpe, but it is in much greater detail than any previous writer has attempted. The enormous task which the author set himself will be appreciated by the average collector who finds a classification of his own glasses—with an estimate of their rarity and importance—difficult enough.

The author stresses the crying need for a uniform terminology and mentions that writers "have used the same words to describe different things and different words to describe the same things and have not even been faithful to their own phraseology." With this, all students of glass will agree. It is difficult to understand, therefore, why the author has himself not been faithful to his own suggested nomenclature and outline drawings.

Vague terms are introduced in the text which find no name in *Nomenclature and Classification* and no *outline* drawings given to clarify them. Examples are, cigar-shaped baluster (page 189), bobbin knop (page 193), half-knop and rudimentary knop (page 230), winged knop (page 232) and oversewn and overstrung foot (page 198).

New terms have been introduced for bowl forms which have for half a century been familiar to dealers and collectors alike by some well-established definition. For example, "pan-topped" and "saucer-topped" bowls are terms suggested for forms which are generally described in all text books on the subject as "double-ogee." Even if the term "double-ogee" is not strictly correct and does not sufficiently describe the outline of the bowl, it only confuses the issue to supplant an accepted definition by a new one just as vague; the object of the classification is to establish uniform terminology, not to bewilder the intending collector.

The book is thoroughly recommended as one that no collector can afford to be without and in which anyone with an interest in glass will find something new. E.M.E.

OBITUARY

GEOFFREY HOBSON, M.V.O.

Geoffrey Hobson, whose death at the age of 66 took place on Jan. 5th, had been a director of Sotheby's for forty years. Tribute has already been made in the press to his distinguished scholarship. Amongst other works, he was the author of *Maioli, Canevari, and Others; Thirty Bindings;* and *English Binding before* 1500. But although English and French bookbinding was his chosen field, he had an intense interest in all the arts from which he was not debarred by deafness, including the modern schools. In his last publication, *Art after the War*, he made proposals for the rearrangement of the national museum collections, under the direction of a Minister of Fine Arts. In the same work he put forward a plea for increasing the amenities of London squares and, in the case of one, suggested the erection of a tea-house to conform with the surrounding architecture. Delighted with this plan, he continued with the provocative suggestion of dressing the waitresses in period costume. Forestalling the storm of objections which this would inevitably arouse, he himself set them forth, but only to sweep them aside again in favour of his own idea, for the simple reason of "what fun" it would be. This justification, in an age when fun and aesthetics have long parted company, was typical of his zest in life, a youthful quality perhaps even rarer than the others.

MRS. WILLOUGHBY HODGSON, F.R.S.A.

Porcelain collectors will learn with regret of the death of Mrs. Willoughby Hodgson, whose name has been familiar to collectors for almost half a century. Although she had been leading a secluded life for the past eight or ten years owing to increasing infirmities, her interest in ceramic matters, and indeed in the collecting of antiques generally, remained unimpaired.

Although Mrs. Hodgson lectured extensively at one time, and even inaugurated the novel idea of giving courses of lessons in china-collecting (a manœuvre made necessary by the lack of text-books to guide early collectors), it is mainly through the medium of her writings that she is known to the present generation. Her small volume, *How to Identify Old China*, appeared in 1903 and went through many editions in the next twenty-five years. It was followed in 1905 by *How to Identify Old Chinese Porcelain*, in 1913 by the sumptuous *Old English China*, and in 1924 by *The Quest of the Antique*. New information has been discovered since these books were written and attributions have been revised, but it is to be questioned if their value for young collectors has greatly diminished; their author had a happy and easy style of writing which proved immensely helpful to readers.

Mrs. Hodgson must be regarded as one of the pioneer figures in the field of English ceramics, and a worthy successor to those great names, Lady Charlotte Schreiber, Sir A. W. Franks and Sir A. Church; and like all pioneers she had a dauntless spirit which enabled her to surmount private and public worries alike.

Porcelain collecting has progressed immensely since Mrs. Hodgson's heyday, and it is perhaps not easy to realise the extent of the work which pioneers such as she had to carry out; but those of us who are the fortunate possessors of cabinets of fine porcelain owe to her, and the art of connoisseurship she did so much to found, an enduring debt of true gratitude.

F. SEVERNE MACKENNA.