

Writing Labels of Museum Objects

Student Resources

Object Record 1: 20th Century Machete

Found in: World Cultures Collection

Catalogue Number: [1981.933](#)

Catalogue Description: "An early twentieth century machete from Jamaica with a steel blade and horn handle. The blade is grooved with a stamped inscription and a steamer. Some loss of material from the handle."

Dimensions: W 5.6 L 58.9cm

Acquisition: Grierson Macara Bequest 1934



Additional thoughts and context:

- Who do you think would have used this machete, and what would they have used it for?
- Can you find out what the Grierson Macara Bequest is, and / or any information about how this object came to be in Greenock?

- It's likely that this machete was used for cutting sugar cane, so what stories can this object help us to tell about the sugar industry in Greenock?
- The signs of rust and use are interesting as they connect the object back to the person who might have used it – how could this be introduced into the label?

In the English-speaking Caribbean, machetes are typically known as cutlasses. Cutlasses can be used for cutting through rainforest undergrowth, and for agricultural purposes (e.g. cutting sugar cane). The cutlass could and was also used during slave rebellions on plantations.

This particular cutlass/machete was made by Robert Mole & Sons of Birmingham. This company was for a long time considered the best quality manufacturer of machetes. It was founded in 1690 by Hermann Mohll, a German craftsman and several associates, as a sword making business in London and Durham. In 1835 A descendant of Hermann Mohll, Robert Mole, moved the business to Birmingham. They specialised in swords, sword bayonets, lances, javelins, machetes for plantation use, and made swords for the War and India offices, the Board of Ordnance and the East India Company. The company became Robert Mole and Sons in the 1830s.

The cutlass has a steam ship logo on it, which was used by Mole and company for machetes produced for export to the colonies for a limited period in the late 19th century.

Consider these photographs of people using cutlasses in Jamaica around the time that this particular one was in use:



© Diane Arbus. Photograph of two women holding Jamaican cutlasses.



© Getty Images. Plantation workers in Jamaica in 1905.

Object Record 2: First World War Chocolate Box

Found in: Social History Collection

Catalogue Number: [1996.67](#)

Catalogue Description: "First World War chocolate box sent as a gift to HM forces from the British Caribbean colonies. The tin bears the emblems of Trinidad, Grenada and St Lucia and is marked: "The Gift of the Colonies of Trinidad, Grenada and St Lucia to His Majesty's Naval and Military Forces", and 'This Chocolate is Made from Cocoa Grown in Trinidad, Grenada and St Lucia'.

Dimensions: W 13 L 13

Gift of Mrs Robert A. Reid 1918



Additional thoughts and context:

How does this object intersect with the history of Caribbean servicemen who joined the British Army in World War One?

A total of 15,600 men fought in the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR), which was stationed in France and Flanders, as well as in Palestine and Jordan. They suffered institutional racism despite their service – for example, the War Office had initially opposed the inclusion of West Indian troops, then set up a new (but therefore 'segregated') regiment for them in 1915. They were not given the opportunity to fight as equals alongside white soldiers, but were usually limited to performing 'labour' duties. They were denied due pay rises, and subjected to a delay in demobilisation at the end of the war, which led to a mutiny by members of the 8th Battalion in the city of Taranto, in South Italy.



© Imperial War Museum. Members of the BWIR during the First World War.

It's interesting also to think about the history of cocoa production in the Caribbean and how this is linked to sugar production in the region. In some cases (for example, in Grenada), cocoa production followed on from sugar production and actually helped the island transition away in a positive economic way from the ravages of sugar over-production. In other ways, because cocoa is bitter and needs to be sweetened with sugar, the two products were mutually interdependent. This meant that sometimes when sugar prices rose or fell, cocoa prices and production was affected.



© Caribbean Journal. Cocoa Production in Grenada.

The First World War adversely affected cocoa trading. Shipping lines were disrupted, resulting in spoilage of beans. Germany (a major consumer) was unavailable to British colonies for trade as a war belligerent.

Trinidad: the Spanish first planted the Criollo variety of cocoa in Trinidad in 1525. Trade began in earnest in the 18th century, when cocoa traded at a very high price. By 1830, Trinidad and Tobago was the world's third highest producer of cocoa, after Venezuela and Ecuador, producing 20% of the world's cocoa. Production dominated the economy between 1866 and 1920. Over production in West Africa, the onset of the Great Depression in the USA, the appearance of Witches' Broom disease in Trinidad and Tobago in 1928, and an increase in world sugar prices, all led to an ongoing decline in cocoa production on the island.

Grenada: cocoa production started in 1714, when the trees were first introduced. The island was captured from the French by the British in 1762. In the 1760s Grenada was the largest producer and exporter of cocoa, responsible for about 50% of British West Indian cocoa exports.

The West Indies is currently undergoing something of a renaissance of cocoa growing and repositioning itself as a gourmet food destination (single estate chocolate being produced, the presence of luxury brands such as Hotel Chocolat), which is having a positive effect on tourism too.

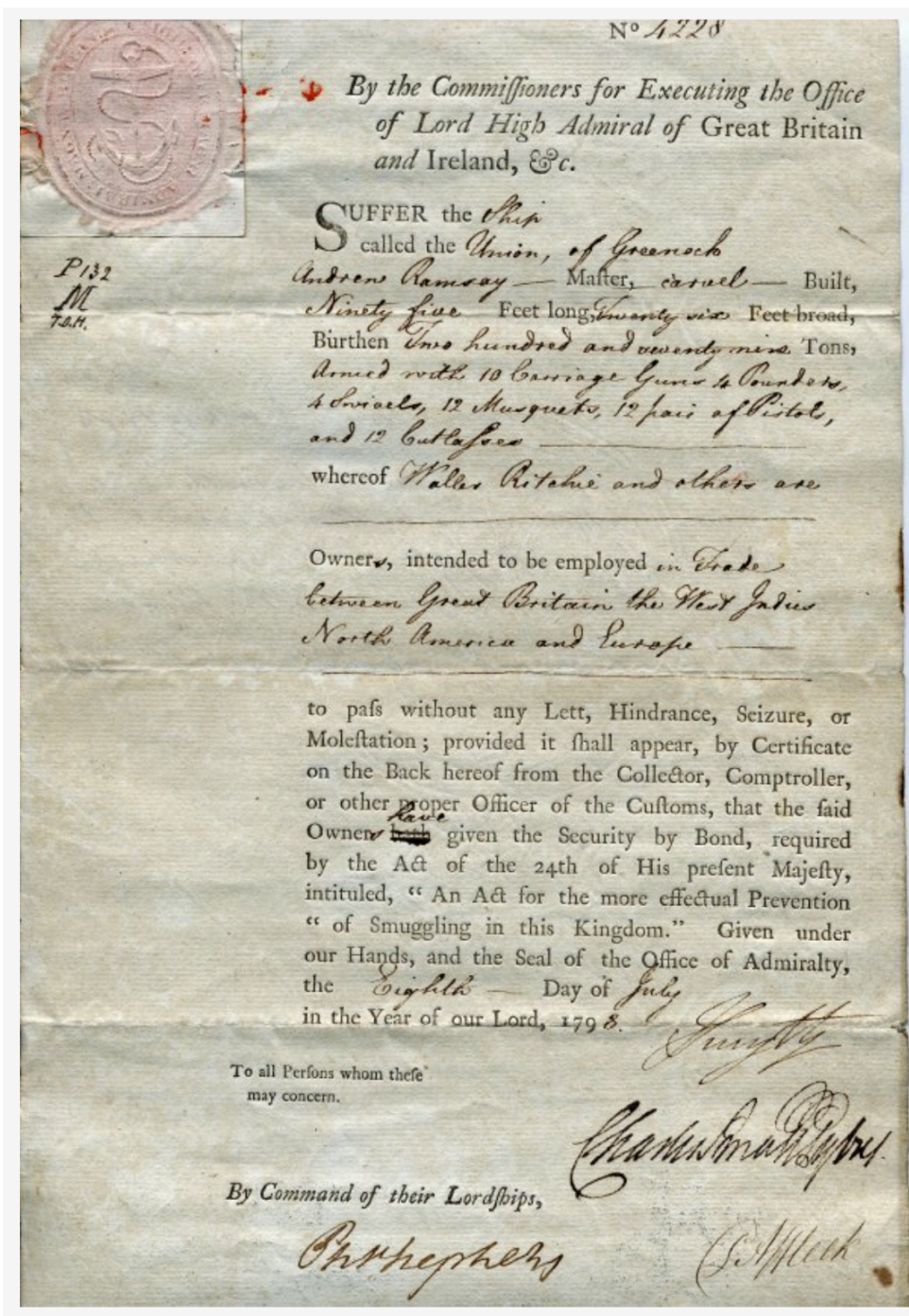
Object Record 3: Permit

Found in: Social History Collection

Catalogue Number: [1978.188](#)

Catalogue Description: "Admiralty Papers allowing the ship Union of Greenock, mastered by Andrew Ramsay, to trade between Great Britain, West Indies, North America and Europe, dated 8 July 1798"

Gift of Messers. T.O. Hunter and Co. 1882



Additional questions and context:

What could we find out about Andrew Ramsay (the ship's master), or Walter Ritchie (the ship's owner) by looking through archives (ship index and port authority papers)?

Walter Ritchie is listed in the Post Office Directory in Greenock as a merchant living in Jamaica Street in 1805. His office was located on the West Quay. He was born in 1740 and died in Greenock in November 1827. It appears that he filed for bankruptcy in London in 1816. He had shares in the Greenock Library and was an importer of mahogany too.



© McLean Museum and Art Gallery. Patrick Downie, The Passing of Old West Harbour, Greenock.

Mark Duffill has Walter Ritchie listed as one of the investors in the *Juba* ship, which left Greenock for Africa and Barbados in July 1765, and returned to Greenock in July 1767. The other investors were: James Simpson, Colin Dunlop, John Cunningham, James Weir, and Alexander Creighton; the owner was O. Simpson, Dunlop and Co. The *Juba* discharged Barbados sugar and a small quantity of ivory on its return to Greenock on 2 July 1767.

(NAS Greenock C.A. e.504/15/12, cit. in Mark Duffill, 'The Africa Trade from the Ports of Scotland, 1706-66', in *Slavery and Abolition* 25 volume 3, 2004, pp. 102-122)

And could we find out more about the journeys made by the *Union* Ship and what cargo it might have carried (through looking at harbour records, customs accounts, and so on)?

Think about the date this permit was issued (1798), and the destinations it would travel to (West Indies, North America, Europe). Potentially also to fight French ships in the Revolutionary Wars?

Object Record 4: Bottles

Found in: World Cultures Collection

Catalogue Number: [2013.12.1-2](#)

Catalogue Description: "Two eighteenth century case glass gin bottles from the Netherlands. Both are black in colour, but the original colour of the glass may have been olive green, with square sides sloping towards the base. One bottle is damaged and without a neck. The name of the maker 'v HOYTEMA & C' is moulded into the side of one bottle. These bottles were found by the donor at Brass Island, Nigeria.

From the late-eighteenth century, Dutch gin, exported in cheaply manufactured blown glass bottles, was sent to West Africa as an export trade good. The gin was packed in bottles of this shape for ease of transport. Once it reached the west coast of Africa it became, along with textiles, rifles and gunpowder, a sought after European trade good, especially as part of the mix of goods employed in the slave trade. It was particularly favoured by the African coastal traders who played an important role as interlocutors for the European powers with those who controlled the sources of slaves in the interior of Africa."

No information listed on provenance.



Additional questions and context:

The **Van Hoytema and Company** was a distillery operating out of Culemborg in the Netherlands. Gin bottles such as these were (and can still be) found all over Africa (for example in Nigeria, and Kenya). Anecdotally, it would seem that they have been kept by families as reminders of relatives taken into the slave trade). They are also commonly found in multiple places in the USA. The Van Hoytema Company made their own bottles between 1861-1928.

Brass Island, Nigeria was an important location in the slave trade. A traditional fishing village of the Nembe branch of the Ijo people, it became a trading port for the state of Brass (Nembe) in the early 19th century. Ruled by African merchant houses, which were encouraged by the European traders, the state's chief slave-collecting centres (Brass and Nembe) often sent war canoes into the interior – especially through Igbo country – to capture slaves to exchange for Western cloth, tools, spirits, and firearms. Brass was one of the last slave-exporting depots on the gulf; the rulers of the nearby Bonny kingdom used its concealed delta ports as an outlet for their slaves destined for markets in Brazil and Cuba after the British had gained control of the Bonny river.

It's interesting that there is no donor or provenance information listed here – museum records indicate that the bottles were part of a donation made by Mark Crawford, but there are no details of how he came about them.

Object 5: Diary

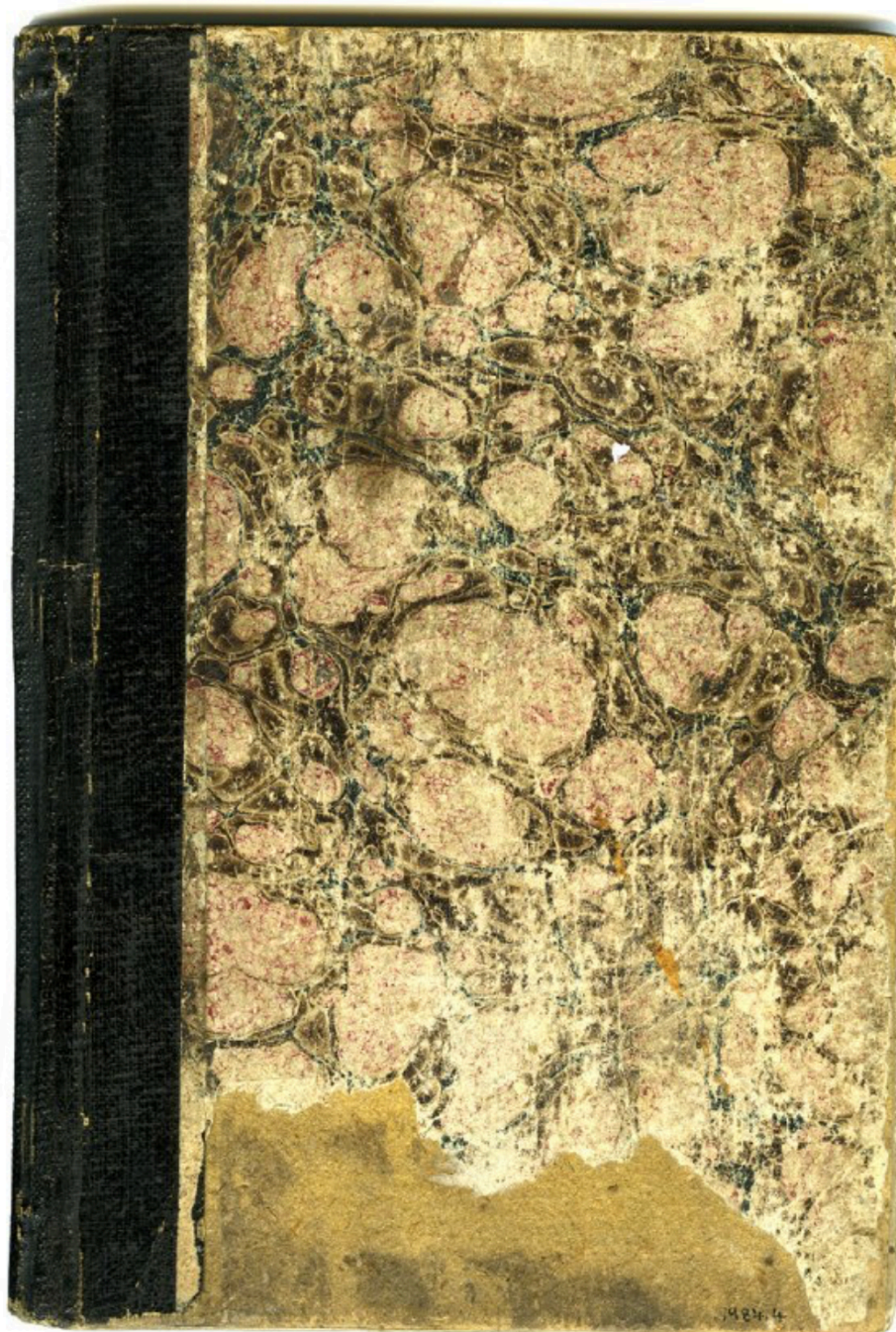
Found in: Social History Collection

Catalogue Number: [1984.4](#)

Description: "Diary of a journey by ship's carpenter Neil Smith on the barque Cape Finisterre from the 10 May 1876 to 26 October 1877. The vessel was registered in Greenock. Pink and brown cover with mottling and black binding. Written in ink. Back cover missing.

The Cape Finisterre was an iron hulled 3 masted barque built by Thomas Wingate & Co., Glasgow in 1874 for Abram Lyle & Sons, Greenock who owned the vessel until 1889. It was then sold on through various owners and arrived in Egypt in 1924."

No information on provenance.



Additional questions and context:

What can we find out about Neil Smith? The 1881 and 1884 Greenock Post Office Directories have him listed as living at 16 Antigua Street.

Harbour records and customs information might help us to find out more about the Cape Finisterre barque.

On its maiden voyage (1874), it seems to have sailed to Tasmania – carrying equipment and personnel needed to set up a new plant smelting iron ore near Launceston. When discharged it was reported that the ship would proceed to Newcastle to load coal for Java, whence she would convey sugar home to Greenock.

On this journey (1876), it sailed from Greenock to Liverpool to Sourcebay to San Francisco to Liverpool.

It was sold to German owners (1891), Italian Prospero Razeto (1904), and then the Egyptian government, it was used as a training ship in Alexandria (1924), where it was still present into the 1960s.



Since the boat was owned by Abram Lyle there are some good links to Greenock and sugar to explore here. Lyle was born in Greenock in 1820. He developed a shipping business with his friend John Kerr, which included transporting sugar. Together with four partners he purchased the Glebe refinery in Greenock in 1865. With his three sons he bought two wharves at Plaistow, East London in 1881 and constructed a refinery for producing golden syrup. Lyle's business was merged with that of Henry Tate to make the conglomerate Tate and Lyle. Lyle was also Provost of Greenock from 1876-1879.

Since there is no detail on provenance - how did this diary come into the museum collection?

Object 6: Mariner's Trunk

Found in: Social History Collection

Catalogue Number [2017.87](#)

Catalogue Description: "Black tarpaulin covered mariner's trunk which belonged to John Clapperton (1834-1903) which was used by him on his visits to his sugar plantation in Cuba c. 1850-60. He built the house 'Drumslea' on the Greenock esplanade and died there in 1903.

Dimensions: H 64 W 54 L 84.

Miss Ann Keiller Greig Bequest 2017.



Additional questions and context:

There are several portraits of Clapperton also in the Watt Institution collections (2017.86; 2018.7), and of his family – a miniature of his father (?), Captain John Clapperton (1801-1838), who was Master of the ship St. Mary, died and was buried at sea in 1838.

There is also a picture of the St. Mary ship when Capt. Clapperton senior was in command (1837) – 2017.77. It was owned by Smith and Co. and traded between Jamaica and Greenock.

There is also a portrait of Clapperton's mother Elizabeth McAra (1803-1894) in the collection – 2017.81, and his brother James (1836-1856) who ran away to sea aged 16 and was lost four years later at sea.

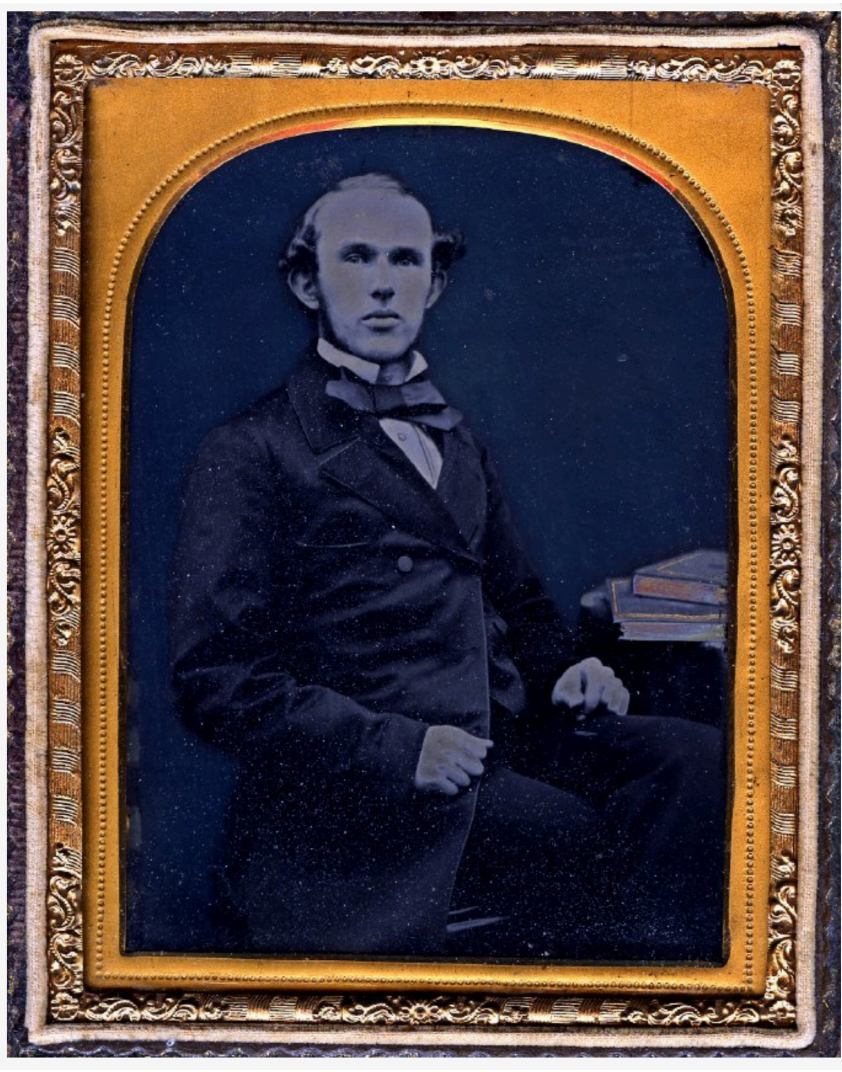
And finally, a portrait of Captain Hugh Clapperton (1788-1827), another family member, who was a famous and very important African explorer.

There is mention made in the label of Clapperton owning a sugar plantation on the island of Cuba. It is important to note that slavery was not abolished in Cuba until 1886, so it is probable that Clapperton's plantation there was worked by enslaved labourers.

I believe that the Clapperton residence at Drumslea no longer exists, but it is interesting to think that there is a whole area of central Greenock that is now known under the same name.

It would be interesting to look into finding more information on the trips made to Cuba by Clapperton – perhaps by looking at the harbour records.

It seems as if the trunk (and the portraits) were all part of a bequest from someone who has family connections to the Clappertons through her mother's side of the family.



© McLean Museum and Art Gallery. Portrait of John Clapperton (1834-1903) as a Young Man.

Object 7: Metal Food Tin

Found in: Social History Collection

Catalogue Number: [1982.74](#)

Catalogue Description: "A mid 20th century metal food tine for Westburn Treacle with transfer printed label 'Virginia Table Treacle – Specially Refined for Table Use – By Appointment to His Majesty the King', and decorated with a coat of arms and an illustration of a sugar refinery. On the other side is the text 'Westburn Sugar Refineries Ltd. Greenock Manufactured in Scotland and Warranted 1-2lbs'

Dimensions: H 10.5 Dia 10.

No information given about the provenance.



Additional questions and context:

The Westburn was founded in 1896 as Berryards Refinery and operated continuously until 1997, apart from a spell between 1941-6 during which it was extensively rebuilt following air-raid bombing damage. It was taken over by Tate and Lyle in 1976 and was the last surviving cane sugar refining factory in Greenock.

Why do you think this was known as Virginia treacle?

(I have found a Library of Congress photo showing people making molasses from sugar cane in Racine, West Virginia, 1938, so I am not sure if this was a particular type of treacle.)

Abram Lyle invented golden syrup as a sugar by-product in 1883, and it is famous for having the oldest brand and packaging in the world.

In the MacFie papers (held in Glasgow University Archives), Robert MacFie writes from the West Indies to his family in Greenock: "Do you ship any of your golden syrup to the US? Lyle's imported here from New York is on sale here in Puerto Rico!" (Box 33, 8th November 1909)

here yet, as motor
automobile" still got that petrol light
you put in in Pto Rico, but I don't
been a few weeks ago, and the main
the Haw. Islands, had some moralle acetylene
pleasant light without smell, and were said to be much
electric light or kerosene, and no trouble to manage.
It must be getting a trifle bleak in England now - here it is
a shade cooler than in summer which we don't object to.
I hope you and all yours are well -
Your affec^{te} brother
R. MacFie
Do you ship any of your golden syrup
to the U.S.? Lyle's imported here from New York
is on sale here in Pto Rico!
Our papers here
ground at the Election,
and New York papers, so I
but that may be true. I certainly
old lose ground. The Unionists need

© Glasgow University Archives

Object 8: Punch Bowl

Found in: Decorative and Applied Art Collection

Catalogue Number [1999.101](#)

Catalogue Description: "Porcelain Punch Bowl by Philip Christian of Liverpool (fl 176 – 1776) with painted, partially unwrapped sugar cone and inscribed 'Success to the Greenock Shugar House'. Probably refers to the opening of the sugarhouse in Sugarhouse Lane by Mark Kuhl in 1765.

Purchased with the assistance of the National Fund for Acquisitions 1999.



Additional questions and context:

Liverpool porcelain was a type of soft-paste porcelain, rather heavy and opaque, and was produced between 1756 and 1800 in various factories in Liverpool. Most products were exported to America and the West Indies. The earliest factory there was owned by Richard Chaffers and Company. Philip Christian (the maker of this bowl) was Chaffers' partner and took over the factory when Chaffers died in 1765.

Mark Kuhl was a German sugar boiler and a partner in the first Greenock sugarhouse built in 1765. He was also the second husband of Margaret Andrew, the elder sister of William MacFie's mother, Mary Andrew. Kuhl died in 1782.

Punch is a loanword from Hindi – original drink named paantsch, which is Hindi for five, and drink made from five different ingredients: spirit, sugar, lemon, water or tea, and spices. The drink was brought back from India to England by sailors and employees of British East India Company in the early 17th century.

Punch quickly became popular, and was served in elaborately decorated ceramic or silver bowls. These sometimes had lids, and were sometimes supported by stands. They often had accompanying ladle or cups. Punch bowls were commonly used for testimonial purposes – for example, the first successful whaling voyage from Liverpool was commemorated by a punch bowl presented by owners of ship to captain.

Punch is also now a popular drink in the Caribbean.

The sugar on the bowl is depicted as a sugarloaf or cone. This was the usual form in which refined sugar was produced and sold in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when granulated and cube sugars were introduced. A tall sugarloaf would then require sugar cutters or nips to break off pieces, which would be handled using sugar tongs.

Households bought their white sugar in tall, conical loaves, from which pieces were broken off with special iron sugar-cutters. Shaped something like very large heavy pliers with sharp blades attached to the cutting sides, these cutters had to be strong and tough, because the loaves were large, about 14 inches (36 cm) in diameter at the base, and 3 feet (0.91 m) [15th century].

In those days, sugar was used with great care, and one loaf lasted a long time. The weight would probably have been about 30 pounds (14 kg). Later, the weight of a loaf varied from 5 to 35 pounds (2.3 to 15.9 kg), according to the moulds used by any one refinery. A common size was 14 pounds (6.4 kg), but the finest sugar from Madeira came in small loaves of only 3 to 4 pounds (1.4 to 1.8 kg) in weight...Up till late Victorian times household sugar remained very little changed and sugar loaves were still common and continued so until well into the twentieth century.

Elizabeth David, *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*, London: Penguin, 1977, p. 139.

Object 10: Sugar Tongs (1780)

Found in: Decorative and Applied Art Collection

Catalogue Number: [1980.33](#)

Catalogue Description: "Late 18c Greenock provincial silver sugar tongs. George III fiddle pattern with shell bowls and oblique fluted pattern on sides and engraved monogram 'A' on convex part. Two assay marks: an anchor for Greenock. Maker's mark AR set inside rectangle on each limb above bowl on the inside.

Dimensions: W 5.5 L 15.3 cm

Purchase 1980



Additional questions and context:

George III was alive between 1738-1820, and was King between 1760-1820.

The fiddle pattern referred to here is a design with a violin shaped handle.

The anchor symbol was sometimes used to signal Greenock – others included a green oak, an anchor, a ship in sail, or the letter C.

Greenock silversmithing activity was linked to the sugar refining wealth present in the town. Greenock's assay office (used to authenticate silver) was closed down in 1836 when a statute was passed which required all Scottish silver to be assayed in either Glasgow or Edinburgh.

Who is the maker 'AR', could we find any more information about them?

Who do you think would have used these? Would they have been used by a very wealthy family? If these date from c. 1780, they would have been used on the cusp of a change in the consumption patterns of sugar in Britain, as Mintz describes:

During the period 1750-1850 every English person, no matter how isolated or how poor, and without regard to age or sex, learned about sugar. Most learned to like it enough to want more than they could afford. After 1850, as the price of sugar dropped,

that preference became realized in consumption. A rarity in 1650, a luxury in 1750, sugar had been transformed into a virtual necessity by 1850. Furthermore, it seems certain that the biggest sucrose consumers, especially after 1850, came to be the poor, whereas before 1750 they had been the rich.

Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, London; New York: Penguin, 1985, p. 148.

The sugar that was consumed, however, was grown through enslaved labour.

From 1700 to 1773, British imports from its North American and Caribbean colonies rose from 19 to 38% of all British imports, while exports from Britain to its colonies rose from 10 to 38% of total British exports. To feed this economy between 1701 and 1780 up to one million slaves were landed in the British Caribbean colonies, with the largest portion destined for the sugar and coffee plantations of Jamaica. Slaves were purchased on the West African coast using a wide variety of locally-produced manufactures including textiles, beads, iron bars, copper pans, brassware, guns, and gunpowder, stimulating rural industries and supporting British population growth. [...]

What is crucial about this history, is the way in which slavery touched people in the most intimate ways – in terms of the foods and drinks they ingested and in the making of their domestic environments.

Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, London; New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 86-87.

Unless otherwise stated, all images reproduced here from the Watt Institution collections are under the copyright of the Inverclyde Libraries, McLean Museum and Art Gallery and Inverclyde Archives Service, and available for non-commercial use under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0 License.

Emma Bond, November 2020
efb@st-andrews.ac.uk