

# STOPPERS FOR THE PIPE-SMOKER

By ROGER FRESCO-CORBU

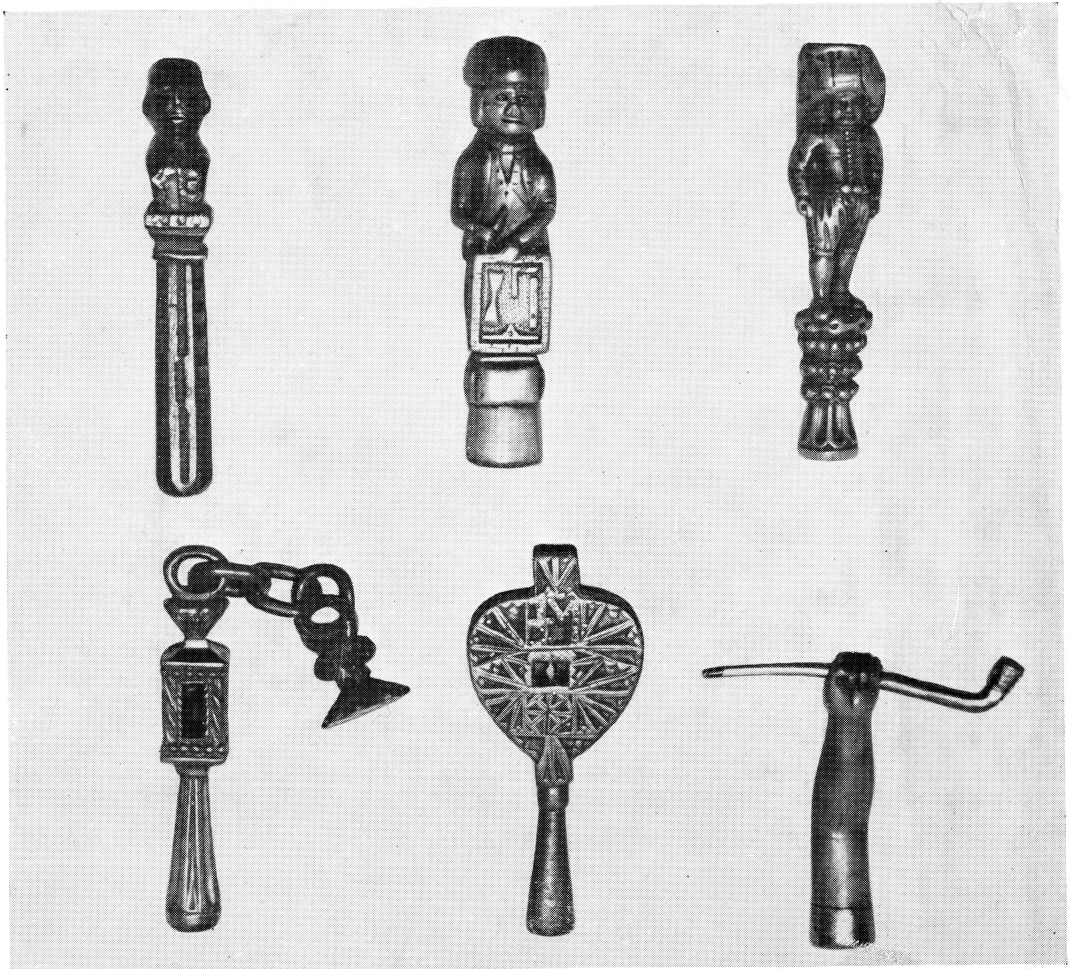
THE *Oxford English Dictionary* describes the tobacco-stopper as "a contrivance for pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of a pipe while smoking." Thus is prosaically described a charming little bygone of the smoker's equipment from the 17th century to the 19th, which is superseded to-day by the purely functional flattened end of the smoker's penknife and spike outfit, or, more often, by the forefinger. Made in a large variety of designs of many different materials seldom exceeding four inches in length, stoppers exercised the imagination of craftsmen as diverse as the woodcarver and the silversmith, the glass-blower and the pewterer, for more than two centuries.

This is admirably expressed in a poem devoted to the tobacco-stopper by William Woty, writing under the pseudonym of J. Copywell of Lincoln's Inn, in his volume of poetical essays, *The Shrubs of Parnassus*, published in 1760.

*O! 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 fight,  
And oft transparent art thou seen in glass  
Portending frangibility . . .  
And freaks of fancy pour upon the view  
Their complicated charms, and as they please,  
Astonish.*

Tobacco-stoppers were generally made of wood, bone, ivory, mother-of-pearl, glass, ceramics, silver, pewter, iron, steel or brass, but also occasionally of less orthodox materials such as one described by an anonymous author in *Paper of Tobacco*, published in 1839. This consisted of a bear's tooth tipped with silver at the bottom and inscribed with the name of "Captain James Rogers of the *Happy Return* Whaler, 1688." There are records of boars' tusks also tipped with silver, points of stags' antlers and other similar trophies of the chase adapted for use as stoppers.

The earliest literary reference to wooden tobacco-stoppers, or indeed to any stopper, that I was able to unearth is that made by John Taylor, the Water Poet, in his *Wandering to see the Wonders of the West*, published in 1649. At Glastonbury he saw a branch of the holy thorn, reputed to have grown from the staff stuck in the ground by St. Joseph of Arimathea and famous for its miraculous flowering at Christmas. Four years earlier it had been cut down by Cromwell's soldiers during his campaign in the West Country. Taylor says: "I took a dead sprigge from it, wherewith I made two or three tobacco-stoppers, which I brought to London." The tree in question was a variety of hawthorn, but history does not record the design given by



1.—WOODEN TOBACCO-STOPPERS. Stoppers were used from the 17th to the 19th century for pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of a pipe. (Left to right) Head of Shakespeare, 18th century; figure with Masonic emblems, 18th century; figure of a boy, 1720; lantern with chained seal, about 1700; bellows; silver-mounted forearm holding pipe, 18th century

that ardent Royalist to his stoppers in the year of Charles I's execution.

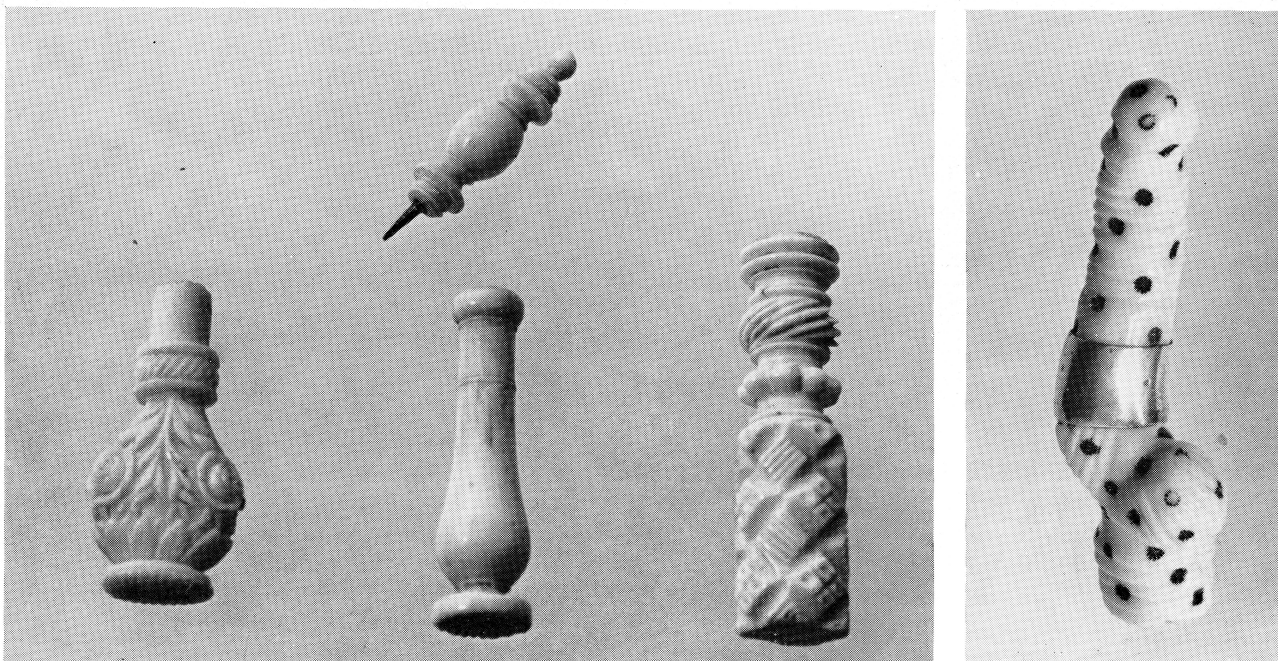
The desire for a souvenir from a famous piece of wood can also be seen in a number of surviving tobacco-stoppers supposed to have been made of wood taken from the Boscobel Oak, which gave asylum to Charles II in 1651 after his defeat in the Battle of Worcester. One such specimen in the Bumpas collection at the British Museum is heart-shaped and silver-mounted. The silver is engraved on one side with a Royalist motto in Latin and on the other with "Cut from the Royall Oak by Mr. George

Plaxton, Parson of that Parish." In Addison's *Spectator* for March 18, 1712, the author describes a conducted tour of Westminster Abbey accompanied by Sir Roger de Coverley. On being shown the Coronation chairs, the knight whispered in his ear that "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."

Wooden stoppers were never mass-produced, but were essentially a peasant art, their quality ranging from excellent models to the crude efforts of the unskilled whittler (Fig. 1).

Like the stoppers made of other materials they covered a wide range of subjects—booted legs, hands holding pipes, tools of practically every trade, grotesque figures, personalities of the day and sporting subjects, but with a strong bias towards country pursuits. Coursing greyhounds with or without hare were particularly well modelled in boxwood. This was an ancient sport popular during the reigns of George III and IV, and country folk carved imaginative representations of favourite hounds.

The afore-mentioned Will Wimble seems to have been as prolific a maker of stoppers as any and to have distributed them liberally, according to Addison (*Spectator*, January 8, 1712). "Upon which he [Sir Roger de Coverley] put his hand into his fob and presented me



2.—18th-CENTURY IVORY STOPPERS. The middle stopper is in two parts that screw together; the metal spike is for loosening the tobacco. (Right) 3.—IMITATION CORAL STOPPER IN OPAQUE WHITE GLASS

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."

Bone was another material readily accessible to the countryman, and many stoppers were carved in this substance. Henry Mayhew, in *London Labour and the London Poor*, published in 1851, interviewed large numbers of London street-sellers of all kinds of wares, among them an old street-seller of pipes and bone tobacco-stoppers. Since these men bought their wares wholesale from swag-shops, as the warehouses and general dealers were called, it would appear that a fair number of bone stoppers were produced commercially. There is also a reference, in the old man's story, to the Duke of Wellington's well-known antipathy to tobacco and his efforts to stop the army from smoking. "At that time—well, really, then, I can't say how long it's since—I sold little bone tobacco-stoppers—they're seldom asked for now, stoppers is quite out of fashion—and one of them was a figure of 'old Nosey,' the Duke you know—it was intended as a joke you see, sir; a tobacco-stopper."

One is left with the impression that by this period these little gadgets were already a bygone, yet Dickens, writing about the same time, uses the term tobacco-stopper as if he were referring to quite a commonplace object. In his *A Christmas Tree*, published in the Christmas number of *Household Words* for 1850, Dickens writes: "Consider Noah and his family, like idiotic tobacco-stoppers."

Although tobacco-stoppers continued to be made during the second half of the 19th century, mostly in cast brass, their popularity was on the wane. Small numbers are even made



4.—17th- AND 18th-CENTURY BRASS STOPPERS. (Left to right) Minerva; double head, forming a cardinal and a jester, with (below) initialled ring stopper; Harlequin

running high, double heads appeared on the medallions (Fig. 4). When looked at one way, the head of a dignitary of the Catholic church would be seen, but when reversed the evil face of a devil would be revealed. This was often accompanied by an offensive motto pointing out the duplicity of the priest in question.

Also popular about this time and well into the 18th century were the ring-stopper (Fig. 4). The grip was a ring flattened on the outside and engraved with the owner's initials or crest.

When worn the ring could be used as a seal while the shaft was concealed in the hand.

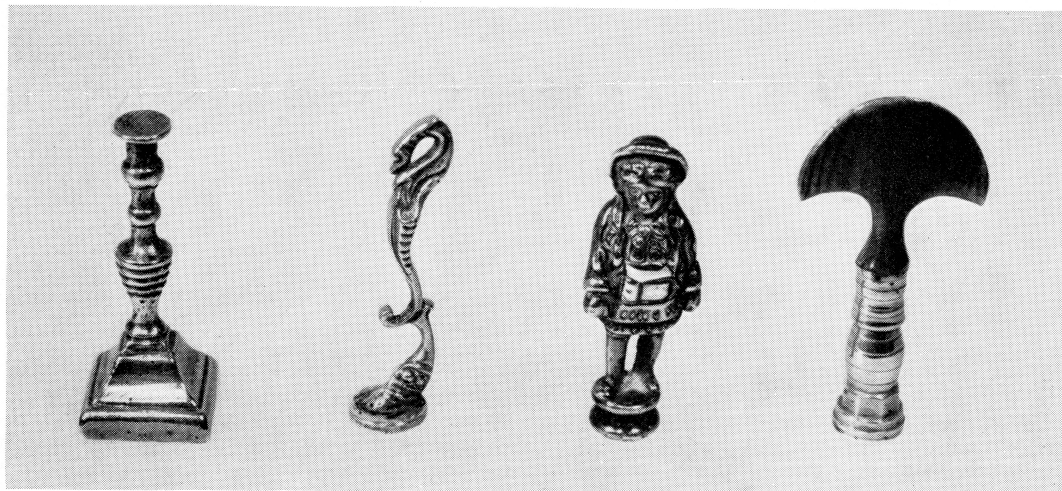
During the 18th and 19th centuries numerous designs in brass were made, including famous personalities, but whereas in the 17th century these were generally cast on medallions and occasionally as busts, they now appear mostly as complete figures or busts.

The combination of seal and stopper is not uncommon, and the combination of stopper, seal and corkscrew is also known. Legs were one of the most popular designs in all materials; but while France added the feminine touch, Britain remained mostly masculine, with male booted legs wearing the Hessian, Blücher, Wellington or other popular boots of the day (Fig. 6).

Tobacco-stoppers are occasionally fitted with a spike for loosening the tobacco in the pipe. This spike can be an external fitting, such as a fist holding a spear. More often, however, it is concealed in the body of the stopper, which unscrews so that the spike can be taken out and used (Fig. 2).

It would be surprising if, apart from the materials mentioned, almost anything that could be cut, moulded or generally fashioned had not at some time or another been made into tobacco-stoppers that now lie neglected, their purpose unknown, in the backs of drawers, attics, or similar dusty emporia of by-gones—some day to be rescued to delight a collector, as they once delighted the original owner.

Illustrations: 1, Pinto Collection of Wooden By-gones; 4, Guildhall Museum; 2, 3, 5 and 6, author's collection.



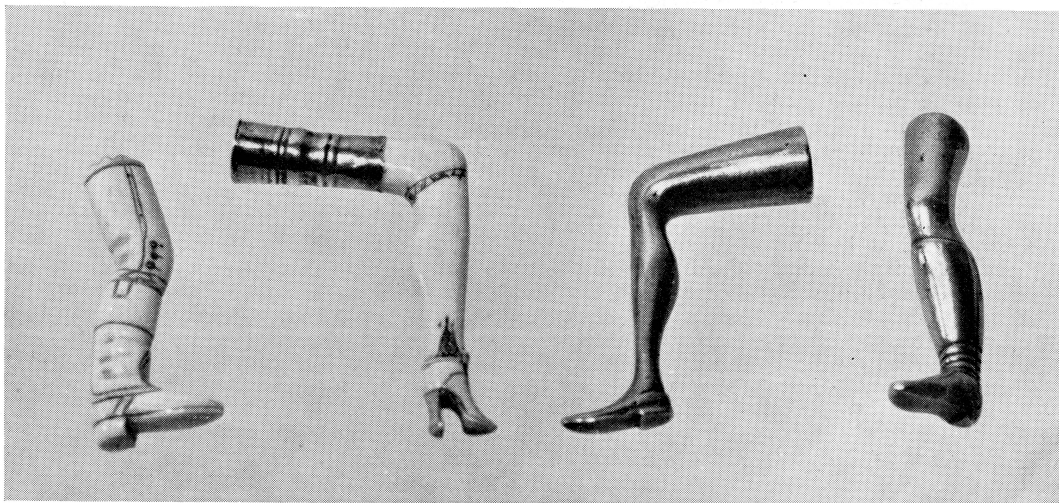
5.—LATER BRASS STOPPERS. (Left to right) Candlestick, early 19th century; heraldic bird on goat's foot; little girl, 1870s; stopper with green-stained ivory grip, late 18th century

to-day, more as brass ornaments than as tobacco-stoppers, but for the collector there will not be much of interest made after about 1875.

Ivory stoppers were among the most artistic made, being generally carved or turned by the craftsmen of the various British and Continental firms specialising in ivory work. Although this may have been only a side-line with some carvers, a number of ivory stoppers must have been made to order for fitting into the compartment provided in certain tobacco-boxes.

Mother-of-pearl, used ornamentally for centuries, does not appear to have been a popular material for tobacco-stoppers, although some made from it do exist.

Brass has been most universally used for their manufacture, from the 17th century to modern reproductions. The grip of many early brass stoppers was coin-shaped with the raised head of the ruler. Charles I and II, Cromwell, William and Mary (on obverse and reverse sides of the medallion) and Queen Anne have all appeared. During the second half of the 17th century, when religious feelings were



6.—"LEGS WERE ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR DESIGNS IN ALL MATERIALS." (Left to right) Riding-boot, ivory, early 19th century; woman's leg, ivory, French, 1770s; slippared foot, brass, early 19th century; Hessian boot, brass, 1820s