

## Articles

### *A Short History of Some Common Everyday Objects*

So, you are dressed in your finest at a demonstration and a passer-by begins asking questions about when certain items of clothing or common everyday items first came into use. What do you do? Here is a quick primer to answer some of those nagging questions as well as to entertain your audience.

**Toothpaste/Toothpowder:** Tooth powder has been around since ancient Egyptians and there is evidence that it used by the Babylonians. Those who enjoy the taste of modern toothpaste won't be enchanted by the ingredients of some of these older toothpowder recipes which included ground egg and oyster shells, pumice, and myrrh. The Chinese used "chewing sticks" made from tree twigs to freshen the breath and clean their teeth around 1600 B.C. The Greeks and Romans also used tooth powder. Unfortunately, dental hygiene fell into disuse during most of the Medieval Ages and only began to make reappearance in Europe during the Renaissance. By 1800s, glycerin was added to the common ingredients (which frequently included Borax and bicarbonate of soda by that

time). This mixture created a type of paste which is closer to the modern day toothpaste. The collapsible toothpaste tube was introduced to the world by Dr. Washington Sheffield in 1892.

**Eye-Glasses or Spectacles:** No one really knows who invented eye-glasses but they made their first documented appearance around 1280s. Some historians point to an Italian friar named Salvino D'Amato as the possible inventor sometime around 1285. Others point to a Dominican friar named Alessandro della Spina in 1280. Regardless of the identity of the inventor, portraits of people wearing eyeglasses can be documented as far back as 1352. These early glasses were handmade with individually ground lenses and had no nose or ear grips. The nose piece began to make its appearance in the 1310s. The first tinted eye-glasses appeared around 1650. Mass production of eye-glasses began in France in the 1740s.



**Coffee:** Ah, the sweet smell of consciousness in the morning! Legend has it that a goat herder in Southern Ethiopia discovered the virtues of the coffee bean after watching his herd eat them. The use of coffee in Arabia was documented by 1000s. By the 1500s, coffee drinking could be found in many of the near eastern Countries and Empires including the Ottoman Empire. Coffee's popularity may have been aided by the fact that the Koran forbids the drinking of alcohol but says nothing about "French Roast" or "Ethiopian". The Venetians traded with the Ottoman Empire and soon brought the coffee bean to Italy. Religious opponents decried the new drink because of its origins and called it a "brew of the devil" until Pope Clement VIII gave his approval of the drink in 1615. Highly caffeinated monks followed and its use soon spread throughout Europe.

**Mirrors:** Vanity is a common historical trait and people have been looking at their own reflections for a very long time. The use of early mirrors made of black obsidian has been traced back almost 4,000 years in Mexico (around 2,000 B.C.). Polished brass mirrors were in use in China around 1500 to 1000 B.C. Brass or Copper mirrors were in use by the Romans around 500 B.C. Our concept of the mirror can be traced to the manufacture by Venetians as early as 1290s.

**The Razor:** The use of a razor to remove body hair was practiced by the ancient Egyptians. Their razors were made from flint, copper blades, and even shark's teeth. A straight edge razor with a wooden handle was invented by Jean-Jacques Perrot in the late 1770s. The straight edge razor (or "throat cutter" as it was sometimes called) was in wide use until the beginning of the 20th century. King Corp Gillette, with the help of William Nickerson, obtained a patent for the safety razor in 1903 and began producing them in 1904. Versions of this razor are in common use today.



**Chocolate:** Those who have a sweet tooth will be happy to know that there is a long history behind chocolate. Historians believe that use of cacao plant was first practiced by the Olmecs in Mexico around 1,500 B.C. to 500 B.C. Its use spread to the Mayans who used it in a drink mixed with vanilla and chili peppers. When the Spanish invaded Mexico in 1519, they recorded that the Aztecs frequently drank the beverage. The Spanish brought the cacao beans back to Spain where it was sweetened with sugar. The rest is history. The Dutch and the English began making chocolate bars in the 1840s-1860s. Milk chocolate bars were invented in Switzerland in 1870's.

**Beer:** The Sumerians may have been the first culture to brew beer. The Egyptians and Babylonians used beer as medicine. Self-medication by the masses followed soon afterwards. The Romans regarded beer as a drink fit only for barbarians. They preferred wine which was thought to be blessed by Bacchus. The brewing of beer also appeared independently in several cultures including China and those in South America. During the Dark and Middle Ages, monks in Europe refined the process of brewing beer and traded in the beverage as a means of financing their communities. The oldest continuing breweries are in Germany and German Brewers introduced the first beer purity laws by 1516.

**Pencils:** Greek scribes were the first to use lead sticks (styluses) as writing instruments. The first wooden encased pencil came into being around 1564. It looked a lot like a hotdog and consisted of a graphite stick inserted into a wooden holder. The first mass production of pencils began in Germany in 1662.

**The Longbow:** Unlike most people, re-enactors do tend to have the most interesting things sitting around their living rooms. The longbow was created in Wales and saw documented use as a weapon as early as 1337. The use of a longbow required years of training but its military applications were undeniable. Arrows shot by a longbow could penetrate chain mail at several hundred feet. The early longbows were made from yew and measured over 6 feet in length. Longbows were used in the Hundred Years war between France and England at Battle of Crecy (1346), Poitiers (1356) and Agincourt (1415). The composite bow is far older than the longbow and traces its lineage to Asian countries but was also utilized by the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Huns, and Mongols.

**The Bra or Brassiere:** The Bra or Brassiere is a relatively modern invention. There have been various attempts for breast support throughout history. The Greeks used a single piece of material wrapped around the chest to support the breasts and to keep them in place as early as 2500 B.C. Spartan women used cloth or leather wrappings to strap their breast down thus allowing them to compete in sporting events and the Chinese used a garment called the "dudou" which was a wrap-around cloth with cups and which was drawn over the shoulders. The corset began seeing wide spread use (or wide spread torture depending upon ones' viewpoint) in Europe by the mid-1500s. Bodices made also their appearance around the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Camisole made its appearance in the 1850s.

Most historians credit the modern bra to Mary Jacob, an American socialite. Ms. Jacob's invention was essentially two handkerchiefs tied together with a ribbon and the design was patented in 1914. She sold the patent for \$1,500. Her design was improved upon by Ida Rosenthal, a Russian-American, who developed cups in various sizes and who would later become one of the co-owners of Maiden Form Brassiere Company in the 1930s.

**Zippers:** Buttons, hooks and lace were the "rage" before the invention of the Zipper. Buttons can trace their usage as far back as the Ancient Egyptians and perhaps even further in time in India. The zipper is a far more recent invention. Whitcomb Judson was a fat engineer living in Chicago. Legend has it that he was tired of bending over to hook the fasteners on his shoes. He invented the first zipper (or "clasp-locker") in 1891. The early Zipper was used for boots and shoes and most historians agree that it didn't work very well. Gideon Sundback, a Swedish engineer, made improvements in the design (in both the clasps and teeth) in 1913 and the Goodrich Company used Sundback's modified design on rubber boots. This new design was so popular that Zippers began seeing their use on clothing by the 1930s.

**The Toilet:** The early recorded use of toilets can be traced back to the Romans who built latrines directly over their sewers system which allowed the water to pour into the Tiber River. The use of chamber pots was widely practiced in towns and cities during the Medieval Ages and the Renaissance. Unfortunately, these pots were generally emptied directly into the street leading to sanitation problems. The flush toilet was developed by Alexander Cummings in 1775 who received a patent for his invention. Joseph Bramah improved upon the design by mounting the water tank high above the seat with a hinge and a pull chain which would empty the water in the tank. Thomas Crapper improved upon the design by adding a shutoff valve. Indoor plumbing was a rarity for all but the wealthy until the 1840s. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, flushing toilets began to become a common fixture in most homes.

**Safety Pins:** Believe it or not, the modern day safety pin was invented by a man who was simply trying to get out of debt. Walter Hunt, an inventor, invented the safety pin as a way to pay off a \$15.00 debt. He later sold his 1849 patent to a group of creditors for \$400.00.

**Soap:** The use of soap has been around since the Babylonians. They made it by boiling animal fat and ashes. Pliny the Elder, a Roman, documented the use of soap as early as 150 A.D. In both cases, the documented use of soap was to clean clothes not people. While the use of soap for personal hygiene was practiced by the Celts as early as 200-300 A.D., it fell into disuse in Europe during the Dark Ages and then made a reappearance in Muslim countries around 600 to 700 A.D. and in Spain and Italy around 700 to 800 A.D. The art of soap making spread to both France and Britain around the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.

**By Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles**



**Sources:** Jonny Acton, Tania Adams, Matt Packer, *Origin of Everyday Things* (Think Publishing, 2006); Norman King, *The Almanac of Fascinating Beginnings* (Carol Publishing Group, 1994); Brian M. Fagan, Ed., *The Seventy Great Inventions of the Ancient World* (Thomas & Hudson, 2004); Kendall Haven, *100 Greatest Science Inventions of All Time* (Libraries Unlimited, 1006); Rodney Carlisle, *Inventions and Discoveries, All the Milestones in Ingenuity-From the Discovery of Fire to the Invention of the Microwave Oven* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2004); Ian Harrison, *The Book of Inventions* (National Geographic, 2004); and Harry Oliver, *Bubble Gum and Hula Hoops, the Origins of Objects in our Everyday Lives* (Perigee Book, 2007); [www.beer100.com/history/](http://www.beer100.com/history/); <http://www.antiquespectacles.com>; <http://www.ncausa.org>; <http://www.smithsonianmag.com>; <http://library.thinkquest.org>; <http://inventors.about.com>; <http://www.soapmakingfun.com>; and <http://library.thinkquest.org/27344/history.htm>.

