

**LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL COMMUNITY PROGRAMME
SEGMENTS POETRY WORKSHOP
MARCH 2021 : GLASS BOTTLES or BOTTLED POETRY**

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EXERCISE ONE: Warm-up writing exercise – Patron Saints

Look at the poem *The Patron Saint of Schoolgirls* by Liz Berry.

<https://acupofpoetry.tumblr.com/post/68225798294/the-patron-saint-of-school-girls-by-liz-berry>

Now look at the list of patron saints. Pick one (or make up your own) and write a brief piece/poem bringing that saint back to life. Write in the first person ('I' form) as if you are the patron saint telling us in your own words about your life, times and death as a patron saint. What miracles did you do? How did you get to be the patron saint of a particular thing? How did you die? When is your Saints Day and how do people celebrate you?

EXERCISE TWO: The theme for this exercise is GLASS BOTTLES

Make notes on your thoughts, feelings, memories, anything you find interesting that are evoked by the items and your associations with the theme in general.

Some of the items we will be looking at are housed in the Butcher Row House Museum in Ledbury's Church Lane (pictured below). The Museum has a rather striking collection of antique glass bottles arranged in the front window as you approach the building. In this workshop, we will be using some of these bottles as an inspiration for writing.



Butcher Row House Museum, Ledbury

History

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glass_bottle

<https://www.jarsandbottles.co.uk/blog/the-history-of-glass-making/>

<https://www.festivalofantiques.co.uk/a-collectors-introduction-to-antique-bottles/>
<https://sha.org/bottle/glassmaking.htm>

Glass has been around for centuries, dating back to as early as 4000 BC. Some historians claim the first known glass was formed within the mouth of a volcano as a result of intense heat caused by an eruption, melting the surrounding sand. It is thought glass was first used as tips for spears and arrows but it was soon realised that glass could be used for more conventional uses.

The earliest bottles or vessels were made by ancient humans. Ingredients were melted to make glass and then clay forms were dipped into the molten liquid. When the glass cooled off, the clay was chipped out of the inside leaving just the hollow glass vessel. This glass was very thin as the fire was not as hot as modern day furnaces. The blowpipe was invented around 1 BC. This allowed molten glass to be gathered on the end of the blowpipe and blown into the other end to create a hollow vessel. Eventually, the use of a mould was introduced. The first glass bottles were produced in SE Asia around 100 BC, and in the Roman Empire around 1 AD.



PICTURE– Roman hexagonal bottle, centre picture above

With glass making its way into British hands courtesy of the Romans, historians suggest that until the collapse of the Roman Empire the trade secrets of glass making were closely guarded.

PICTURE– Wine bottle dating 1690-1700, found in England c.2018 (above, top left)

Britain's glass industry suffered due to heavy taxation. It wasn't until the repeal of the excise act in 1845 that the British market started to thrive.

PICTURE– Glass workers, 1845 (above, top right)

As glass became increasingly more important to the container, beverage and oil industries, it was not long till the traditional techniques were becoming outdated. In 1887 the first semi-automatic machine was created. With this machine capable of producing 200 bottles per hour the rise of the bottle industry was born. It was only a matter of time before the first fully automated machine was developed in 1904 by Michael Owens, increasing production to a staggering 2,500 bottles per hour.

PICTURE– Michael Owens’ Automated Bottle Machine (above, bottom right)

Today the glass industry has become a modern, hi-tech industry operating in a fiercely competitive globe market. With the competition being vast there is a focus for high quality designs. Glass is seen as an ideal packaging method for wines, spirits, beers, food, medicines and cosmetics industries. With the ever-changing climate and change in thinking behind the environment and sustainability, glass has proved to be both environmentally friendly and sustainable.

PICTURE– Heel of olive oil bottle (above, bottom left)

Markings

Modern bottles, when moulded, will be given marks on the heel (bottom) of the bottle. These marks serve a variety of purposes, such as identifying the machine used in the production of the bottle (for quality control purposes), showing the manufacturer of the bottle, how much to fill the bottle to, the date the bottle was manufactured, as well as other information. Embossing on a bottle consists of raised lettering, numbers, and/or designs that were intended to inform the purchaser in some way of the contents or to establish ownership of the bottle.

The Bottle-Making Process

Everything begins with the bottle and its construction. One method of making a bottle is by the process known as free-blowing. The artisan, called the “gaffer,” free-blows a bottle by dipping a blowpipe in molten glass, inflating it by blowing, and then twisting, rolling, waving and further blowing it until he gets the desired shape.



PICTURE– Free-blowing glass (above, top left)

Mould-blowing, or hand-blowing, starts similarly with the gaffer dipping a blowpipe in molten glass and blowing it slightly with his mouth. However, he then inserts the molten glass into a mould and, with the blowpipe still attached, continues to blow as the mould shapes the glass.

PICTURE– Gaffer and mould boy (above, top centre)

The crafting of moulds was an art itself. The artist, or engraver, used a chisel and hammer to carve out the design, and what is more, they had to create a mirror image rather than the regular design. Plate moulds were used to emboss messages on bottles. They originated in England in 1821.

PICTURE– Cast iron mould plate dating 1915-18, used for producing prescription bottles (above centre)

The Pontil Rod

Since the artisan uses a blowpipe to which the hot glass is attached, they have to find some way of removing the blowpipe without either personal injury or damage to the bottle. Until around 1850, the means used to do this involved something called a pontil rod. After completing the blowing process, the artisan attached a rod to the bottom of the bottle, sometimes by using a bit of hot glass and sometimes by heating the rod itself, to enable them to hold the bottle without actually touching it. They then made a clean break where the blowpipe ended and used the pontil rod to manipulate the bottle as they formed its lip. Breaking off the pontil rod and subjecting the bottle to gradual cooling completed the process.

Pontil Marks

Breaking off the pontil rod almost always left behind some indication of its use, an irregularity called a pontil mark. There are a number of different kinds of pontil marks, the identification of which can help to determine the age of a bottle.

PICTURE– Pontil Scar (above, bottom left corner)

Lips

After the bottle maker had removed the blowpipe, they had to form the lip of the bottle, technically called “finishing” the bottle. Early bottles were sealed with wax. Three common types of lips are cork lips, screw tops, and crown tops. The cork lips were the most prevalent for hundreds of years, since a cork was the surest means of sealing a bottle. The early 1800’s saw the invention of the screw top, but until machine production came about, it was too difficult for bottle makers to create perfect threads.

Bases

The artisan formed the base during the moulding process. Bases can vary widely amongst antique bottles and one of the most interesting is the push-up base, which is essentially an indentation in the bottom of the bottle. There are several theories as to the reason for this base, but the likeliest is that it fortifies and strengthens the base against breakage.

PICTURE– Coloured bottles (above, bottom centre left)

Colours

Antique bottles come in a range of colours that covers the entire spectrum. The composition of glass is standard, but including other materials produces changes in colour. Lime, silica, and soda ash form the basic glass, but adding cobalt, for example, results in cobalt blue. Similarly, selenium, copper, or gold produces ruby red, while carbon or nickel make brown. Greens, specifically aqua and olive, occur most frequently due to iron impurities in the basic mixture.

Imperfections

Bottle makers earned their wages per bottle, which naturally led to their striving to maximise their output. While doing so might have been to their financial advantage, their craftsmanship often

suffered. Haste led to carelessness and imperfections, such as air bubbles and silica stones. In the eyes of collectors, however, these imperfections are often of great worth since they give a bottle a distinctive, individual flavour.

Types of Bottles

The variety of bottles seems practically endless.

PICTURE- Gin bottle from Hay Wines, Ledbury (above, far right)

Common shapes in modern commerce include:

Medical and scientific applications.

Long-necked or Woozy bottles – tall cylinder with a prominent neck, many of which are used as beer bottles

Wine bottle – very standard shape, mostly cylindrical but gradually narrowing into the neck

Spice bottles

Olive oil bottles – usually tall and thin with a prominent neck.

PICTURE – Dr Fisch Bitter bottles (above centre far left)

A commonly coveted bitters bottle, for example, is a fish-shaped bottle designed for Dr. Fisch's Bitters. Bottles of this kind can sometimes sell for thousands of dollars.

Some bottles are not what they seem:

PICTURE– Fire Grenade from Butcher Row House Museum, Ledbury, above, bottom right.

This is a glass globe fire extinguisher known as a "Fire Grenade". These grenades were popular in workplaces and the home in the 19th century. This example is a Harden Star Grenade 'water-bottle' fire-extinguisher, the most popular brand of fire grenades well into the 20th century. Priced at 45 shillings per dozen, the grenade was designed to be thrown into the centre of the base of the fire. The glass would shatter on impact, putting out the fire and saving the home or business. Extravagant claims were made in advertisements about the grenades effectiveness, with the company claiming over 600 outbreaks of fire having been extinguished by the use of the company's grenade. The grenades were also potentially harmful, with later grenades being filled with Carbon Tetrachloride. Although efficient at extinguishing flames, the chemical was highly toxic and could enter the human body through the skin and inhalation causing damage to lungs, kidney and liver.

Finding Bottles

A bottle can be collectible, but unless a collector knows where to look for it, it does them little good. One of the most common ways of adding to a collection is through auctions. If a collector is adventurous, however, they can actually go into the field, so to speak, to find the bottles. Diggers hunt for bottles discarded as useless. Rubbish pits, wells, and outhouse holes and mud-larking are the best locations to find old bottles. Bottle collecting is a hobby for the lover of art. Every bottle is the product of skilled craftsmanship, and through this craftsmanship, it tells its own story. The collector's job is not merely to gather bottles but rather to learn what is behind their every detail. What may seem to be merely something pretty or even a piece of rubbish to the uninitiated, actually tells a completely different story to the experienced collector. A collector's skill is the capacity to see more than the mere factual details of their bottles; they see the work of craftsmanship behind every one.



PICTURES - Bottles from Butcher Row House Museum, Ledbury

Now look at the following poems:

Bottled Water by Kim Dower

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56508/bottled-water>

I Keep My Prescription Pill Bottles by Darby

<https://hellopoetry.com/words/bottles/>

The Letter Always Arrives At Its Destination by Niall Campbell

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/letter-always-arrives-its-destination/>

Author's note:

I came across a revelatory quote 'the letter always arrives at its destination' in an essay on ideology in Charlie Chaplin movies. What is important to note is that the letter does not necessarily arrive at its intended destination. For me, what this pointed towards was the potential in the falling-short; how misplacement or being 'lost' could actually create an opening for something else. By whatever quirk of the mind I immediately thought of that period of childhood I spent obsessed with throwing bottles out to sea – the act of writing towards something, but to no one in particular, was the perfect environment to practise the lie or, more dangerously, to try tell something of the truth.

EXERCISE THREE: Bottled Poetry

Write a poem/piece inspired by the theme and/or the history we've explored. Here are some suggestions for ways in to the writing:

Write a personification poem from the point of view of a bottle. Write your poem imagining the bottle is 'alive' and has the same attributes as a human being. What would it say? Think about its function, where it has been, what it sees, smells, hears, touches etc. Memories? What does it think about/dream about?

Write a poem inspired by the theme that evokes a personal memory for you, maybe involving another person or a personal story.

Write a poem inspired by a specific bottle you have looked at today. Think about your response to it and why you felt that way. Think about what the bottle looks like, its function, its place in your thinking...

Use a form we've looked at in the example poems eg: prose style poem - conversational or confiding style poem as in *Bottled Water* and *I Keep My Prescription Pill Bottles* - writing in 3-line stanzas or tercets like Niall Campbell's poem *The Letter Always Arrives At Its Destination*.

And, of course, you may write a poem about the theme in your own way and in your own style!

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