

Object: Donkey horn

Object Number: STMEA:A:2771

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The call of the horn

Acquired in 1969, the tinned iron horn was supposedly used by the owner to call donkeys, but is also believed to have been a harvest horn for calling reapers at dawn to signify the end of their work¹. The possible dual use of the horn raises uncertainty around the item, however both applications have links to communication and fake news in the age of the horse. Donkeys were often utilised for the transport of goods between towns, pulling carts and allowing for faster journey times. Merchants would travel to several different villages by donkey and cart to sell their crops and often shared anecdotes and stories as they went.² As travel was much slower and more expensive, it was far less common than in modern day Britain. Stories from visitors in other villages and towns would have been of particular interest and likely shared amongst friends and family. As these were communicated verbally, they would have been subject to constant change, forgetting little details or perhaps embellishing the stories to make them more exciting as they passed between individuals. The use of the donkey horn would have facilitated the spread of such information, with the owner using it to summon donkeys to help pull their carts. It is also possible that based on the item's use according to the owner, the horn could have played a role in the Donkey Derby. These were popular local events involving donkey races you could bet on and were often run to raise money for charity.³ Children would line up to have their donkeys inspected before the race began. There would be rides and games and items for sale, similar to that of a funfair or a carnival. Such large scale events provided occasions for chatting and gossiping with neighbours and friends, including the spread of potential news. This is poignant as communication was largely done verbally and in person before the widespread use of technology, and therefore less frequently considering you couldn't simply send a text and be in constant contact. It also meant that the sharing of stories through chains of people could lead to them being altered and it was difficult to know if someone was telling the genuine truth, thus perpetuating the spread of fake news. However it is interesting to note that once

¹Donkey horn; STMEA:A:2771 [Internet]. My.ehive.com. 2020 [cited 8 August 2020]. Available from: <https://my.ehive.com/accounts/3978/objects/54440/donkey-horn>

²East Anglian Film Archive: Bygones: John Bone, 1976 [Internet]. Eafa.org.uk. 2020 [cited 8 August 2020]. Available from: <http://www.eafa.org.uk/catalogue/203948>

³Pathé. Donkey Derby [Internet]. Britishpathe.com. 2020 [cited 8 August 2020]. Available from: <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/donkey-derby>

donated, the item was not assumed to be a horn for calling donkeys as told by the owner who did not provide specific details, such as whether it was used on owned or wild donkeys. Furthermore, there is little in the way of historical evidence that suggests this was the intended use for the item.

Contrastingly, the harvesting horn was an item used widely on farms from Cambridgeshire to Scotland and Wales, its custom kept up in Essex until 1914.⁴ It would be blown once in the morning to signify the start of the working day, and again in the evening to let harvesters know that it was time for supper.⁵ This gave workers the chance to eat, drink and socialise with one another, chatting until it was time to turn in for the night. Due to the rising demand for labour during certain times throughout the crop cycle, large numbers of temporary workers were employed when yields were high.⁶ Individuals would often travel in order to secure work and income, with harvesters coming from nearby towns to bring in crops. This meant after working hours, conversations could range from local stories to news that would otherwise not have been heard and stories out of reach due to the lack of regular travel. This was not just confined to different labourers either, as some families had snacks or meals with their farmers, suggesting the spread of information between permanent residents and migrant workers.⁷ Thus, the harvesting horn played an important role not just in establishing working routines, but in facilitating human connection and the spread of information. The harvesting horn was part of the relationship between farm owners, who used the horn, and the harvesters, who responded to its call. Related literature suggests that these small devices were used between the 19th and early 20th centuries in a variety of areas which may have each had specific news and stories during this time.⁸ Irrespective of location, this was the age of Queen Victoria, and is known mostly due to the industrial revolution which swept across much of Britain with the invention of the steam engine and mass migration from rural to urban areas.⁹ There may have been discussions of new technologies, Empire and work.

⁴ Evans G. The pattern under the plough. Little Toller Books; 1966, p153-154; Macrabin M. The Cameronian. Blackwood's Magazine [Internet]. [cited 8 August 2020]; Volume 8: p328. Available from: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=UbkCAAAIAAJ&pg=PA399&lpg=PA399&dq=harvesting+horn+to+call+reapers&source=bl&ots=IZ-5JsDn7a&sig=ACfU3U08AcvGifhUzLQ8dPME6LgDpWoTRg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjS2tue4P7pAhXKPsAKHak4Aa0Q6AEwAHoECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q=harvest%20horn&f=false>; Hennell T. Change in the farm. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 201, p115

⁵ Hennell T. Change in the farm. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 201, p115;

⁶ Collins E. Harvest technology and labour supply in Britain, 1790-1870 [Internet].

Eprints.nottingham.ac.uk. 1970 [cited 8 August 2020], p59. Available from:

<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/11840/1/526755.pdf>

⁷ Photograph; c.1908; STMEA:A.2348 [Internet]. My.ehive.com. [cited 8 August 2020]. Available from: <https://my.ehive.com/accounts/3978/objects/53997/photograph>

⁸ Evans G. The pattern under the plough. Little Toller Books; 1966, p153-154

⁹ Industrial Revolution [Internet]. HISTORY. [cited 8 August 2020]. Available from:

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