

# Everyday life in Victoria in the 1890s

Clues from the archaeological record

# Notes

- These slides contain information on everyday items dating from the 1890s, found by archaeologists.
- These represent only those items that would survive more than 100 years of burial. More fragile items made of organic materials are not represented.
- These items are intended to be a sample of highly-valued pieces, or day-to-day items that are no longer in use.
- Many of the images have been taken from the Melbourne Museum catalogue, and this is a great place to search for historical items generally.

# Background

- The 1890s were a time of economic depression in Victoria – the gold rush had ended, the land speculation bubble had burst, and it was a tough time for many.
- Victoria's population continued to expand albeit at a slower rate than at any time since the 1860s.
- Australia was still legally a British territory. Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee was celebrated in 1887 and her Diamond Jubilee in 1897.
- Melbourne had relied on its wealthy and civic-minded citizens to establish hospitals, the university, the botanical gardens and libraries.
- Rural areas were isolated and rural communities were largely self-reliant for food, simple clothing and construction materials. Other items such as homewares were transported from Melbourne via coach.
- Telecommunications were limited to telegrams for those towns that had a station.
- This was just on the eve of hugely significant technological change involving transport, communications, mass manufacturing and war - but of course the people then didn't know that.



Clockwise from top left: Porter bottle, handmade c. 1880; gin bottle, handmade c. 1850-1870; scent bottle, 1880-90s; castor oil bottle, handmade, c. 850-1880; salad oil bottle, aqua glass, handmade, c. 1860-1880.

# Homewares and storage

Glass was the most common storage materials for liquids. Most glass was re-used and it's estimated the average glass container was in use for 4.5 years before being broken accidentally.

In the 1890s glass bottles were likely to be

- Pale aqua coloured: colourless glass became dominant after 1910. Other common colours were cobalt, green, milk-white (especially for medicine or cosmetics) or purple.
- Thicker, and hand-made. Machine-made bottles debuted in the 1880s in England but took time to be established in Australia; machine made bottle in the 1890s was likely to have been imported from overseas.
- Shaped according to contents. Large square bottles held gin; large amber-coloured round bottles held beer; green bottles held wine. Smaller bottles held medicines or perfumes.
- Decorated where they were on display – e.g. salad dressing bottles for the dining table, cosmetics bottles for the dressing table.
- Highly valued and cared for.
- Sealed with cork, glass stopper, or swing stoppers (from 1875).

Tin cans were growing in popularity in the 1870s and 1880s, however they were difficult to seal and transport, and weren't used for food until later.

Tins with hinged lids held matches until the 1930s; they also held tobacco and other dried good like seeds.

# Tableware – basic and fancy

Communal eating was the norm for lunch and dinner, using ceramic and porcelain tableware, often matching.

Spoons and forks were made of wood or plated metal ( stainless steel is not invented until 1913).

Drinks were poured taken from earthen ware or stoneware jugs and drunk from earthenware mugs. Glasses were reserved for alcoholic drinks (e.g. wine glasses, tumblers) and indicated high-status households.

The most common dinnerware pattern was the Blue Willow (still around today). The 1860s-1900s saw a lot of plain white serving ware. Japanese and Chinese porcelain is also found where those communities settled.

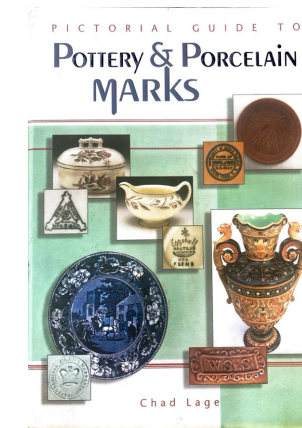
Hand-painted crockery indicated high status items and more common items used a transfer glaze pattern.

Fancier tea sets were found in wealthier houses.

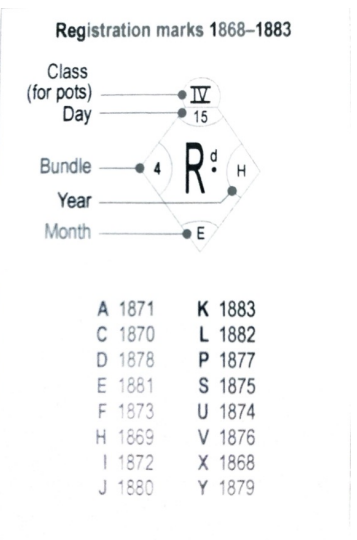
Makers' marks on the backs of tableware can be used to date artefacts.



Left, transfer pattern cup, 1890s; centre, hand painted cup, 1890s; right, willow pattern platter found in Melbourne CBD site, c. 1850s.



Right: how to date British ceramics.  
Heather Burke et. al.,  
*The Archaeologists' Field Handbook*, p. 453



# Clothing– fixings

Buttons were the most common way to fasten clothing.

In the 1880s-90s buttons were likely to be made of

- Bone, with carving and inlay after 1850
- Shell - peaked in popularity in Britain by 1890, popular in US for a lot longer. Rough backed shell buttons were pre-1900, smooth-backed shell after 1900
- Glass. Black glass most popular 1860-1900, because of Queen Victoria's mourning attire
- Milk glass 1880-1900
- Horn
- Rubber 1880-1890
- Metal

The larger the button, the more coarse the piece of clothing. That is, the largest buttons were used on working men's trousers or uniforms, and the smallest on blouses or underwear (men's and women's). Very small buttons have been found on high-status dolls' clothing.



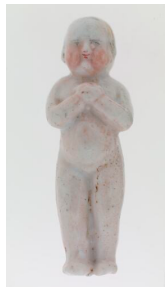
Above: buttons of various materials including shell, bone, metal and glass, c. 1880s. Note the unevenness of the holes, drilled by hand.

# Toys and education

The most common toys that have been found are:

- Marbles– not just glass, but also porcelain, clay and stone, hand-made until 1901.
- Dolls - china heads, feet and hands (fabric bodies don't survive). High status dolls had opening/shutting eyes
- Porcelain or enamel toy tea sets

Writing implements such as slate pencils, ink pens or inkwells, show evidence of literacy and education



These 'Frozen Charlotte' dolls were popular in the 1880s. The 25mm version sold for 1c, nicknamed penny dolls.



Inkwell, 1880s; slate pencil, 1820-1920.



Clay 'Bennington' marble, 1870-1910; porcelain 'bullseye' marble, 1880-1910; glass swirl, 1850-1901.



# Recreation - adults

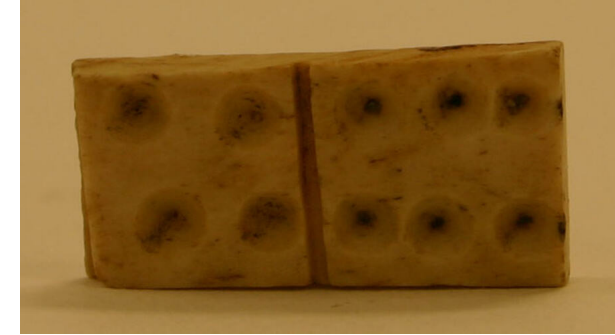
Clay pipes - the precursor to today's cigarettes. They weren't single use but they were cheap and disposable. They could be decorated, especially around the bowl; many were imported from Scotland and Ireland, and decorations served to showcase national or political affiliations (e.g. Irish nationalism). Another common motif was maritime scenes.

Drinking - alcohol was brewed commercially and at home, with bottles reused.

Games included dominos and dice (bone or ivory for high-status, wood for low) 2-up (wood).

Sewing is commonly associated with women and artefacts include pins, needles and bobbins. However, men were also expected to maintain their own clothing if required.

Crochet hooks are frequently found in middle-class homes.



Bone domino and bone die, both c. 1880s.



Clay pipe, 175mm long, 45mm high, c. 1860; clay bowl fragment showing maritime detail, c. 1880s.





# Personal care and toiletries

- Archaeologists have found toothbrushes, hairbrushes, combs, perfume bottles, and ointment bottles.
- However these may have been in short supply and/or expensive – the poorer populations had more limited access.
- Running water was still a struggle for Melbourne in the 1890s as infrastructure failed to keep up with population growth, and the city was nicknamed 'Smellbourne'
- Right: wooden lice comb; bone toothbrush, both c. 1890s.



# Valuable goods

- Wealth was conveyed through clothing and jewellery.
- Family heirlooms could include jewellery, portraits, books (usually the Bible) or clothing. Itinerant or insecure populations tended to have fewer possessions and their heirlooms may have been smaller in size; glass or semi-precious jewels were more common than precious jewels.
- Here are a selection of finds dating from the 1880s thought to belong to working-class households in Melbourne: metal pendant with glass inset; brass wedding ring; bronze crucifix; metal chain.

