

Irish horn spoons: their design history and social significance

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Abstract

The use of animal horn to make smooth eating spoons has a long lineage in Ireland but the subject has received little attention. This paper considers their form and manufacture, how they were traded, their social significance and the ways in which they were used and displayed. It is grounded in the physical examination and comparative analysis of over 120 horn spoons from museums throughout Ireland. Until now, researchers have done little to date these spoons, and this paper concentrates on surviving examples since 1650. Where unavailable in Ireland, evidence about tools and techniques is drawn from Scotland and neighbouring areas with related traditions. Some spoons were made in overtly fashionable shapes while plain and undecorated examples were used by the poor. Institutions issued them to inmates well into the 1920s. In this regard, Irish horn spoons reflect resourcefulness in Irish society.

Introduction

Although the subject of domestic material culture in Ireland has recently begun to be addressed, the possessions of the rural poor can be challenging to research because, compared to items higher up the economic scale, there is less documentation and fewer surviving objects to study.¹ Utensils, and specifically spoons, were hardly mentioned by Estyn Evans whose important book *Irish Folk Ways* (1947)

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¹ See C. Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture 1700–1950* (New Haven and London, 1993). This book is currently being revised towards a second edition; adding new material to its final section, 'Small furnishings,' has led me to research basketry, butter-making equipment, cookware, woodenware, piggins, noggins, drinking vessels, utensils, cutlery and spoons etc. of varied materials. C. Kinmonth, *Irish rural interiors in art* (New Haven and London, 2006); C. Kinmonth, 'Survival: Irish material culture and material economy', *Folklife*, 38 (2000–01), 32–41; C. Kinmonth, 'Noggins, 'the nicest work of all': traditional Irish wooden vessels for eating and drinking', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, 18 (2015), 130–151. My research has centred mainly on the lives and material culture of poor or working rural people in Ireland, rather than that of the aristocracy, although their material culture is influential. For a discussion of the sources for Ireland's material culture, see Toby Barnard, *A guide to sources for the history of material culture in Ireland, 1500–2000* (Dublin, 2005), 53–62.

was one of a series on rural material culture. Isabel F. Grant, the founder of the Highland Folk Museum, illustrated ladles and, uniquely, even a horn spoon and mould, in her Scottish book for the same series.² Many authors have considered silver spoons, most recently Alison Fitzgerald, in her impressive account of the Dublin silver trade.³ Horn is rarely mentioned, however (except when combined with silver).⁴ In Ireland horners (as such specialists were known), horn processing and related trades are neglected subjects that await future research.⁵

My interest in spoons was piqued when I noticed that they were displayed at eye level on dressers. Such deliberately eye-catching arrangements were observed by writers and artists (Fig. 1). What was the nature of these apparently precious spoons, and why were they so coveted that they merited prominent, conspicuous display? The main objectives of this study are to research the manufacture and use of horn spoons in the period c.1650–1925. How did they look, and how had they evolved stylistically? Did their shapes relate closely to the material from which they were made, the diet of those who owned or made them, or a combination of such factors? What types of horn were used and how did manufacturing techniques influence their design? Can they be differentiated, in terms of form as well as materials, from spoons of bone, wood or metal, and were they used simply by poor people for economic reasons, or did they have other functional, ergonomic or economic advantages? Who was involved in making and selling the spoons, for how much, whereabouts and why? Unlike silver spoons that can be precisely dated via hallmarks, horn examples are more challenging to date. The surviving examples since 1650, which are the focus of this paper, can sometimes be linked stylistically to cutlery used by the aristocracy. Earlier examples (Figs 2, 6–8), which merit additional research, are only referred to in passing.

Methodology

In order to establish an inventory of horn spoons, curators were approached in most of the largest museums throughout the island of Ireland, and to a lesser

² E. Estyn Evans, *Irish folk ways* (London, 1957), 262–3. Isabel F. Grant, *Highland folk ways* (London, 1961), 192–3, Fig. 32(A–D), 248–9.

³ Alison Fitzgerald, *Silver in Georgian Dublin: making, selling, consuming* (London and New York, 2017).

⁴ Nicola Gordon Bowe and Elizabeth Cumming, *The arts and crafts movement in Dublin and Edinburgh 1885–1925* (Dublin, 1998), Cat. 130, 154; E.A. McGuire, ‘Old Irish rosaries’, *The Furrow*, 5, No.2 (Feb. 1954), 97–105, discusses inexpensive rosaries of horn, bone and fruit beads, also those incorporating silver, hallmarked in Dublin.

⁵ The horns of cattle are also mentioned briefly in terms of value, but not potential use, by, for example, Jonathan Bell and Mervyn Watson, ‘Slaughtering cattle in Ireland: a historical perspective’, in Michael O’Connell, Fergus Kelly and James H. McAdam (eds) *Cattle in ancient and modern Ireland: farming practices, environment and economy* (Cambridge, 2016), 109 and Figs 4–2, 10–1, 10–2. These figures illustrate how large the horns were, as a potential source material for craftsmen in the nineteenth century.



FIG. 1—Detail of assorted spoons displayed on a dresser, some of fiddle pattern outline, hung in slots behind the upper shelf moulding. Lithograph by Edmond Fitzpatrick ARHA (fl.1848–83), *St Patrick's Night*, 1851, 28 × 39cm (author's collection and photo).

extent in Scotland, England and Wales.⁶ Some responded with photographs; most were visited to examine spoons held in their stores. Hardly any horn spoons were on display. Some had been wrongly identified and were categorised as of wood

⁶ The museums approached comprise about fifteen of the largest on the island of Ireland, the two main holders being the National Museum of Ireland, and the Ulster Folk Museum who hold about forty each. Some of the museums surveyed stated they had none, others had one or two. Private collectors were also consulted. Nicholas Loughnan (Loughnan Antiques, Youghal, Co. Cork) kindly donated an apothecary scoop to the author's horn spoon handling collection. The latter collection, of varied origin, has been invaluable to stimulate discussion and appreciation of such horn objects with curators, design historians and general audiences in conference presentations. Further horn spoons may yet come to light in small public Irish collections, so the survey cannot be considered comprehensive. For comparative analysis, horn spoons can be viewed online from collections of, for example, the National Museum of Scotland, the Robbie Burns Birthplace Museum (which the author visited), the British Museum and the Worshipful Company of Horners.

or bone, or as scoops or ladles, so each visit involved surveying a broad sweep of objects.⁷ Object analysis underpinned each museum visit. This required good lighting, a magnifying glass, measuring implements and photography from numerous angles to assist with research and comparison. Physical handling provides insights into the advantages and limitations of materials. Spoons of bone, and generally those of wood, were not usually bent, but rather cut and carved into shape. Many small white spoons made of bone are flatter than their horn counterparts. Due to the limitations of the material, bone spoons had shallow bowls. Metal spoons were examined for comparison, and ladles showed how horn was made into far larger implements in fashionable shapes, for making an impression when serving in company.⁸

Having identified and surveyed about 120 horn spoons, it was possible to establish which were the relatively common types. Accession records for a great many of these objects consist only of a donor's address or region; many had no accession records. The youngest examples, from the early twentieth century, were mostly donated to museums from political prisoners, many of them famous. Often with integral inscriptions, they had the best accession records. The bowls of others were so severely worn away that they must represent extreme thrift. Some details of decorated spoons were copied by jeweller Michael Duerden to help ascertain how specific patterns had been executed. The owner of an abattoir kindly permitted access to examine recently cut horn, and to discuss variation across species.

Examination revealed typological continuity between the small number of horn spoons in the National Museum of Ireland's Irish Antiquities Division (NMI/IAD) and those in the Folklife Division (NMI/FD). In most cases, however, there is no reliable information to date the IAD spoons (Figs 6–7, also 8). One exception comes from the Fishamble Street excavations in Dublin, dateable to between c.950 and 1050 (Fig. 2). Sophisticated and decorative, three distinct raised rings encircle the gently curved stem, adding finger grip. The line of the horn's grain shows that carving rather than heating formed the handle's curve.⁹

⁷ Curators' terminology varies for items such as scoops, spoons and ladles, so precision is impossible regarding numbers of horn spoons surviving in collections. Some museums had spreadsheets listing horn spoons, but not all the objects tallied with the spreadsheets, and a considerable number of objects could not be located at all.

⁸ The Ulster Folk Museum stores hold some of the best examples of horn ladles. Their collection of wooden ladles (probably associated with dairying) would also repay further study and compares well to those in the NMI/FD.

⁹ Patrick F. Wallace, *Viking Dublin: the Wood Quay excavations* (Dublin, 2016), 320, Fig. 9.16, 349, 298–305. The author is grateful to Dr Wallace for discussion about this object (30.11.2017). Its current condition belies its former sophistication. While on display it has faded almost to white (through light and heat exposure); it was a much darker colour when excavated. According to Adele Schaverien, *Horn: its history and its uses* (Sydney, 2006), 257: 'on no account should horn be placed near excessive heat or in full sunlight ... as this will cause drying out and possible splitting or delaminating'. The topic of conservation of horn items in museums is beyond the scope of this study.



FIG. 2—Viking-period spoon, excavated from Fishamble Street, Dublin *c.* 950 to 1050 A.D. Around the centre of the handle, three decorative rings were raised by carving away the surrounding stem. Originally it was darker, but it has faded. L.14.5cm W. 3.6cm. Courtesy of National Museum of Ireland /Irish Antiquities Division, Reg. No: E172:7914

Originally smooth, perhaps translucent, and ergonomic, it merges function perfectly with aesthetics, and indicates that high-quality horn spoons were manufactured in Ireland centuries before the majority of those considered here. To reiterate, this paper is primarily concerned with the period since 1650. The earlier examples require additional research.

The archives of the National Folklore Collection (NFC), and their Schools' Folklore Collection (NFCS), were studied extensively for references to food, spoons, eating habits, travellers and horners.¹⁰ A variety of texts including Irish Census reports, export records, the Dublin Society's early Minutes and street directories were also searched, revealing the names of a few individuals who manufactured or dealt with horn. Publications about Irish silver flatware and its evolution provided the basis for dating the horn spoons influenced by it. Numerous Irish genre paintings were scrutinised to identify horn spoons; three of the few that could be clearly recognised are illustrated (Figs 1, 11–12). Because information relating to horn spoons within Ireland is scarce, material was drawn from sources relating to Scotland, England and America. This included detailed accounts of their manufacture and function, as well as more references and sayings about horn spoons than could be found from Ireland alone. Discussion with craftspeople still making horn spoons in Wales, and in other parts of Europe, also added to what can be learnt about this ancient craft, its limitations and challenges.¹¹

¹⁰ The National Folklore Collection/NFC (1935–1971) held at University College Dublin, is one of Europe's largest archives of oral tradition and cultural history, including primary and secondary sources covering folklore and folklife. It includes the Schools' Folklore Collection/NFCS (Dúchas, 1937–39). Although the author has had some translated, those Mss in Irish would repay further study.

¹¹ Adele Schaverien, a leading expert, whose definitive book draws on her practical experience working with horn, combined with her work as an archivist for the Worshipful Company of Horners, kindly entered into correspondence. She also commented on the final draft and on terminology, though any errors are not her responsibility. Schaverien, *Horn*.

Material,
manufacture
and trade

The value of horn

Little information has yet emerged about the price of spoons, or the cost of the raw materials involved in making them. Cow horn was easier to press into sheet form than ram or goat horn, which tends to be smaller, more deeply ridged and irregular.¹² Thompson, surveying Co. Meath in 1802, commented that ‘Great size, large bone and fine horn’ were the priorities sought by those selectively breeding cattle.¹³ Evidently, large horns were highly valued, something reflected in the saying ‘cows in far off parishes have longer horns’.¹⁴ A merchant’s probate inventory of 1675 from Athy, Co. Kildare, which includes an ‘Item, for wool, tips of horns and one hyde...at £64.3s.7d’, suggests that horn tips were comparatively valuable.¹⁵ Customs records from 1698–1784 show a considerable and almost continuous revenue deriving from the annual export of ox horns through Irish ports. The processing of ox horn may have been done in Ireland prior to export because separate entries under ‘Goods Exported’ include ‘Hornes Ox’, ‘Hornes Tipps’ and ‘Hornes Pressed’.¹⁶ The value given for horn tips was lower

¹² The author is grateful to Críostóir Ó Cruallaí, of Feoil Ó Críostóir Teo Abbatoir, Ballincollig, Co. Cork, for facilitating her examination of horns cut from sheep, goats, cattle and buffalo (February 2017). An anecdote from the novelist William Carleton (1794–1869) illustrates that sheep horn was valued in the nineteenth century: ‘We went to little lame Larry Spooney’s—grandfather to him that was transported the other day for staling [sic] Bob Beaty’s sheep; he was called Spooney himself, from his sheep stealing, ever since Paddy Keenan made the song upon him ending with “his house never wants a good ram-horn spoon”.’ William Carleton, *The Ned M’Keown stories in the works of William Carleton, stories of the Irish peasantry* (New York, 1881), unpaginated.

¹³ R. Thompson, *Statistical survey of the county of Meath, with observations on the means of improvement, drawn up for the consideration, and under the direction of the Dublin Society* (Dublin, 1802), 297, 300. The author thanks Gerard Whelan for alerting her to this text.

¹⁴ Seamus MacManus, *A lad of the O’Friels* (McClure, Phillips and Co., 1903), 96, 224, ‘A time of wonderful prosperity, when the face of the countryside will smile, and a cow [w]ill fetch the full of her horn of money...’. The author thanks Dr Lisa Godson for drawing her attention to this.

¹⁵ Olive C. Goodbody, ‘Quaker inventories’, *The Irish Ancestor*, 3, no. 1 (1971), 53. This ‘probate inventory of Thomas Rushworth, late of Athy, in the county of Kildare, merchant, deceased’ totals all his goods at £415.14.0, the small list seems a significant percentage of the total, although one cannot ascertain quantities or values for the wool or ‘tips of horns’.

¹⁶ The forthcoming interactive database: *Customs 15, Ireland’s international trade in the Eighteenth Century*, can be seen with sample links: <http://www.duanaire.ie/trade/>. The author is grateful to Aidan Kane (NUIG), for previews and discussion about material relevant to horn, especially for Ox Horn/Horn Prest/Horn Tip (variously spelled) exports from 1698–1784. It shows Dublin followed by Cork, then Waterford, as leading points of Irish export of these various categories of horn (individual words such as spoons or cutlery, are not listed). By the late eighteenth century Cork exceeded Dublin

than that for pressed horn. Presumably these solid tips were sawn off, whereas the broader base sections of the horns were heated and flattened, hence described as ‘pressed’.

The uses for horn

The variety of items incorporating horn is too broad to list. The most utilitarian items made from cow horn include funnel-shaped drenches for dosing cattle and horses, bugles, winding or blowing horns,¹⁷ drinking horns,¹⁸ those adapted as containers and powder horns with capped ends for keeping gunpowder dry.¹⁹ Some of these objects barely differ in shape from the natural form of a horn, but were cleaned out, polished and truncated. Thin, transparent curved horn, being non-flammable, was utilised for metal-framed lanthorns (lanterns) well into the nineteenth century.²⁰ In Ireland horn was also made into buttons, toggles and methers (four-handled communal drinking vessels) as well as drinking beakers with inset bases.²¹ When horn items are mounted with precious metal such as gold or silver, the place, date and maker of the metal may be ascertained via the hallmark.²² For example, a horn beaker with a decorative silver foot and rim, lined with gilded silver, from the Hunt Museum’s collection, was made by John Purcell of Limerick. His mark is stamped on the rim and foot. Productive between 1800 and 1813, Purcell also made fiddle pattern spoons in silver.²³ The horn manufacturer presumably supplied the beaker in horn prior to the silversmith making his mounts to fit the rim and foot, securing them with tiny pins. Likewise, a smaller, unmounted horn cup from the collection of Damer House, Roscrea, can be dated to the early nineteenth century, as it is marked ‘From Killarney Lakes’, like the vast quantity of souvenir items made for the Killarney tourist trade around that time. Horn was widely available, probably cost less than metal, and required fewer special tools to make spoons. In its simplest

as the main port of export in monetary terms. This huge body of customs data would reward future analysis, in this and other design historical contexts.

¹⁷ E. Estyn Evans, *Irish folk ways* (London, 1979), 277. Animal drenching horns are well represented in NMI/FD.

¹⁸ G.J. Monson-Fitzjohn, *Drinking vessels of bygone days from the Neolithic age to the Georgian period* (London, 1927), 9–12. NFCS (Drogheda, Co. Louth), 679, 14; J. Raftery, ‘A travelling-man’s gear’ of Christian times’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 60C (1959), 1–8: 1–2; A.T. Lucas, *Cattle in ancient Ireland* (Kilkenny, 1989), 229.

¹⁹ Schaverien, *Horn*, 192–201. She expands on multiple further uses for horn.

²⁰ Paula Hardwick, *Discovering horn* (Guildford, 1981), 75–77.

²¹ Gertrude Jekyll and Sydney R. Jones, *Old English household life* (London, 1939), 97, Fig. 107: ‘...to this day thin-edged horn is one of the pleasantest things from which to drink beer or cider.’

²² G.J. Monson-Fitzjohn, *Drinking vessels of bygone days* (London, 1927), 9–12.

²³ Hunt Museum ‘Horn Cup’ Reg. No: HCL 009. Ian Pickford ed., *Jackson’s silver and gold marks of England, Scotland and Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2000), 726; Marks on Limerick Plate, Table III, 1800–1820.

form, spoons or scoops could be made not just by specialist ‘horners’, but by resourceful house-holders adept at making many other items of furniture and plenishings themselves.

The advantages of horn for making spoons

Although knives and forks feature commonly in the inventories of the so-called ‘Big House’, spoons were, by the early nineteenth century, the most commonly made of all silver utensils.²⁴ Silver spoons occasionally cropped up in the inventories of Irish farmhouses, but their occurrence was unusual.²⁵ For most of the population, choice of materials for their possessions was a matter of economy. Spoons made from pewter must have been comparatively inexpensive, as they were sufficiently dispensable, in nineteenth-century Co. Mayo, to be used for Halloween divination by melting them ‘through the hole of a key, into a cup of cold water’; the resulting form suggested a future role for the individual.²⁶ Spoons of iron appear in the inventories of grand eighteenth-century kitchens and further down the economic scale, they were prominent among a family’s possessions, so were displayed conspicuously. In poor cabins, they were described as ‘fixed in slits’ of a dresser shelf, by novelist Charles Kickham, as well as by Crofton Croker.²⁷

Iron could laboriously be kept shiny with abrasive Bath Brick, unless it was plated, and re-plated, with tin, to reduce rust and discolouration.²⁸ Unfortunately, the taste of such foods as apple, or onion was tainted if an iron spoon

²⁴ Fitzgerald, *Silver in Georgian Dublin*, 100–03; A. Jackson, *The Oxford handbook of modern Irish history* (Oxford, 2014), 12–13.

²⁵ W. Hanbidge, *The memories of William Hanbidge, aged 93, 1906: an autobiography* (St Albans, 1939), 27.

²⁶ NFCS (Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo), 107: 157. Edward H. Pinto, *Treen and other wooden bygones: an encyclopaedia and social history* (London, 1976), 144, fig.136D, includes wooden spoons, scoops, ladles, spurtles, spoon moulds and those specifically for removing dents from pewter spoons.

²⁷ C.J. Kickham, *Knocknagow: or the homes of Tipperary* (London, 1870), 143; T. Crofton Croker and R. Adolphus Lynch, *Legends of the lakes, or sayings and doings at Killarney* (London, 1829), 180: ‘the dresser ... In the upper shelf were sundry holes, through which were stuck half a dozen iron spoons’.

²⁸ NFCS (Behy, Co. Donegal), 1029: 57. ‘All hands set round the basket, the “kitchen” (this is what they eat with the potatoes and still call it to the present day) i.e. fish, meat, etc. They used their fingers for peeling the potatoes and partook of the “kitchen” with – a spoon (a coarse iron spoon too)’. *Holden’s triennial directory, 4th edition for 1805, 1806, 1807*, 2nd vol. (London, 1805), pp. 66, 67, 69, 71, lists more than six Tin Plate workers at addresses in Cork City in 1805, see also *Munster directory: trades & professions 1870 Cork, Purcell complete* (1852), 3, where John Perry ‘manufacturer of cutlery’ advertised various services including ‘Kitchen furniture tinned and repaired’ from 89 Patrick Str., Cork, in 1852. S. Minwell Tibbott and B. Thomas, *A woman’s work: housework 1890–1960* (Cardiff, 1994), 8.

was used.²⁹ A farmer on twenty acres in mid-nineteenth-century Wicklow wrote how they ‘had no egg cups or egg spoons so we propped them up with potatoes and ate them with the ends of the iron spoons which we used to eat our stirabout...as there was not a small spoon in the house safe [sic] six silver ones which father bought when he got married’. These were carefully displayed using ‘little shelves on the wall’.³⁰ Silver may have held higher status, but it blackens in contact with egg, and imparts an unpleasant taste, which is why silver egg spoons have gilded bowls. Lower down the economic scale, egg became an increasingly important part of rural peoples’ diet. Those lacking egg cups in Co. Wexford simply had holes drilled near the edges of their table, to accommodate the ubiquitous boiled eggs.³¹ On small arable farms around 1900 the women tending large flocks of poultry, potentially created a greater income than their husbands, as ‘the produce of twenty chickens equalled a cow in value’.³² So there were incentives among the rural poor to possess horn spoons rather than silver, because they imparted no taste with eggs. Horn was also smoother on the lips, and easier to wash than wood or rust-prone iron. In the 1860’s, novelist Patrick Kennedy describes how disappointing the taste of a dish of *prapeen* was (oatmeal mixed with milk) when eaten with anything other than a spoon of horn.³³

Processing the raw material

Keratin, the fibrous structural protein of hair, nails, horn, hoofs, wool and feathers, is insoluble in hot or cold water. After cutting a cow horn off the skull, the messy, smelly and unpleasant business of soaking commenced in order to separate the outer horn from its core of bone. After separation the inaccessible interior surface of the horn was emptied and cleaned out with a special long hook-ended knife (Fig. 3).³⁴ Skill was needed to prevent the horn being accidentally pierced. The resulting empty cone could then be used to make various artefacts. Alternatively, the hollowed horn was cut open, sometimes corkscrew-wise, to make a usable piece of sheet. It then had to be heated in water or oil so it could be pressed flat, ready for further stages of manufacture.

²⁹ Rosemary ffolliott, ‘The furnishings of a Palladian house in 1742–3: Barbavilla, Co. Westmeath’ *The Irish Ancestor* 11, no. 2 (1979), 86–95.

³⁰ Hanbidge, *The memories of William Hanbidge*, 27.

³¹ Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, 183.

³² J. Bell, *People and the land: farming life in nineteenth century Ireland* (Belfast, 1992), 82–3. Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to housewifery women, economic change, and housework in Ireland 1890–1914* (Oxford, 1993), 171.

³³ Patrick Kennedy, *The banks of the boro: a chronicle of the county of Wexford* (London, 1867), 195–96. The author thanks Criostóir Mac Cárthaigh for drawing her attention to this text.

³⁴ This is from the collection of over 400 items including some other horn spoon makers’ tools, at the Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University Bournemouth, lent by the Worshipful Company of Horners, London.



FIG. 3—Long handled knife for cleaning out the soft inside of the horn cores, its blade angled to fit into the curves, c.1790. L. 43cm W. 3.4cm. Photo: Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University Bournemouth, courtesy of The Worshipful Company of Horners. Reg. No: WCHL:233.

As many as six spoons could result from a single cow horn, each potentially of a different colour due to natural variation in the keratin. Colours and shapes also varied according to each animal's breed and age.³⁵ Historically, specialist horners carried on their work in proximity to butchers and tanners, near slaughter houses, shambles and abbatoirs,³⁶ where the raw material for their trade was abundant. The prolonged soaking of raw horns, prior to releasing the flesh and bone inside, and subsequent heating, created 'a pungent and pervading smell', which clung to the craftsmen.³⁷ The haunts of horners seem deceptively far removed, from the smoothly polished, golden end-products, the spoons, that resulted from their labours.

Spoon manufacture

David Buchan explains an expression from Scots folklore, 'He'll mak a speen or spile a horn',³⁸ as meaning 'to make a try at it'.³⁹ This reflects the fact that working horn was challenging; it was, to use David Pye's phrase, 'workmanship

³⁵ Schaverien, *Horn*, 100, 241–46; W.R. Wilde, 'On the ancient and modern races of oxen in Ireland', *Proceedings of The Royal Irish Academy*, 7 (1857–1861), 64–75: 73.

³⁶ Bell and Watson, 'Slaughtering cattle in Ireland', 110–11. Conditions at such shambles were 'nightmarish' and 'very messy, to say the least.'

³⁷ Schaverien, *Horn*, 4.

³⁸ David Buchan, ed., *Scottish tradition: a collection of Scottish folk literature* (London, 1984), 185. Also 'Lat the horns gang wi the hide.', 186.

³⁹ J.M. Wintemberg, 'Folklore collected in Ontario' *The Journal of American Folklore* (April-June, 1918), vol. 31, 135–53: 141: 'make a spoon or spoil the horn...it was considered a good test of a man's ingenuity to make a porridge spoon out of a horn. The man

of risk', involving a valued material.⁴⁰ According to Schaverien, 'the oldest and most obvious way to use horn was to exploit its natural shape'.⁴¹ Yet the processing of any type of horn, to make even a naturally shaped spoon, still involved soaking, cleaning out the inside and smoothing the surfaces. At its most simple, the next stage was to cut away part of the broad end at an angle, smooth the cut edges, and retain the narrowest pointed part to act as a handle for a spoon or scoop. These 'natural tip' spoons are discussed further below (Figs 6, 9).

There were about seven distinct stages to making most horn objects. Many items were made using pre-flattened or pressed sheets. Specialist craftspeople, competing to sell their spoons at fairs or door to door, learned to cut open the cone of the cow horn along one side, render it flexible in boiling liquid and produce a pressed horn sheet. It had to be clamped flat before it cooled and hardened again, ready for subsequent stages. Schaverien proposes that, in England, those carrying out the ingenious yet 'stinking business' of breaking and splitting horn, known as 'horn pressing', formed a separate trade.⁴² She illustrates various mechanical presses developed by the nineteenth century to flatten multiple sheets of horn simultaneously.⁴³ Such machinery may have been beyond the reach of small batch Irish spoon producers but, as noted above, export records suggest such a process was undertaken in Ireland.⁴⁴ Usually, the process of pressing sheets for a small number of spoons would have been undertaken without any such machinery. Contemporary craftspeople experimenting with these processes simply use a frying pan over an open fire to soften pieces of cleaned horn, then flatten them successfully between paired pieces of weighted timber. Tallow came in useful, because the heated sheets were liable to become sticky and needed to be detached from their presses or moulds. Women were involved in the horn trade and were listed in the London Horners' Company records as early as 1641, while Diderot (1713–84) illustrates a woman tending a huge pot over a fire, in a French horn workshop, along with seven men.⁴⁵

Tools of the trade

A rare collection of tools used by horners survives, collected by the Worshipful Company of Horners in England. These include a steel cutter, spoon-shaped in

who showed me one of these spoons near Washington, in 1902, told me he had often heard his father, a lowland Scotchman, use this expression.'

⁴⁰ D. Pye, *The nature and art of workmanship* (Cambridge, 1978), 4–8, 24, 26, 75, 83–6. Also Peter Dormer, *The art of the maker: skill and its meaning in art, craft and design* (London, 1994), 87, 91.

⁴¹ Schaverien, *Horn*, 4.

⁴² Schaverien, *Horn*, 13, 16.

⁴³ Schaverien, *Horn*, 49, Fig. 33. No information about mechanical pressing in Ireland has been discovered, yet.

⁴⁴ Schaverien, *Horn*, 49.

⁴⁵ Schaverien, *Horn*, 19–21, Fig. 4.



FIG. 4—Steel cutter for stamping blanks from prepared horn sheet, prior to reheating, moulding and finishing, while making horn spoons. The lowest edge is sharp, the top edge thick, for strength. L. 13cm, W. 2.5cm, D. 2.5cm. Photo: Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University Bournemouth, courtesy of the Worshipful Company of Horners. Reg. No: WCHL:203.

outline with sharpened edges (Fig. 4). This was hammered down onto the pre-pressed horn sheet to produce flat blanks ready for moulding. The sheets of horn could also each be split longitudinally to make multiple thin sheets or pieces of specific thickness. Heating the raw material in water, oil, milk or urine, was a skilled activity. Too high a temperature spoiled the natural translucency—which, like tortoiseshell, is a cherished aesthetic feature of newly polished horn—rendering it disappointingly dark and opaque. A technique sometimes used by travellers in Scotland to soften the horn, prior to moulding, was to push it into a heated turnip.⁴⁶

One of three surviving pairs of wooden moulds, or ‘spoon sets’, each with leather hinges, was collected in Scotland by Isabel F. Grant (1887–1982) (Fig. 5).⁴⁷ The softened horn was swiftly clamped into the mould, which was kept closed, sometimes by holding together the narrowest ends with a metal band.⁴⁸ Great care was required, as the horn tended to delaminate if bent too

⁴⁶ Pers. comm. Rachel Chisholm, curator, Highland Folk Museum.

⁴⁷ In addition to the three in the Highland Folk Museum, there is another wooden mould in the National Museum of Scotland, Reg: A.1904.81.4, from Torshavn, Faeroes. This small vice-like wooden clamp, capable of pressing two sizes of bowl simultaneously, has a wooden threaded screw at one end and a hinge at the other for tight alignment. Unlike other moulds, it leaves the spoon handle free and only clamps the bowl(s). According to National Museum of Scotland curator Godfrey Evans, ‘The mould appears to be either 18th or 19th century, measures 40 × 22 × 8cm (the 22cm width is the length of the threaded rod.’ The author is grateful to Elaine Edwards and Godfrey Evans for assistance. See also Hardwick, *Discovering Horn*, 37, 139–40: from ‘Edinburgh Museum...Eighteenth Century wooden former for spoon with iron band for pressure closure (length 35.5cm).’ She also illustrates turned conical wooden formers, for shaping horn beakers from uncut hollowed horn.

⁴⁸ Illustrated in Hardwick, *Discovering horn*, 139.



FIG. 5—Spoon mould of wood with leather hinge for shaping horn spoons (with Scottish horn spoon inset for scale). Used by travellers, Aberfeldy, Perthshire, Scotland. Nineteenth century. L. 45cm. Courtesy of Highland Folk Museum, Newtonmore, Scotland. Reg. No: SKA 59.

acutely where the bowl met the handle. Then the shaped horn was left to go cold and harden completely. In parts of Scotland where the manufacture of spoons was well-established (and spoons survive in their hundreds in museums), metal moulds survive as a legacy of more sophisticated mechanisation and organisation of the trade, for example in Kilmarnock, East Ayrshire.⁴⁹ Once unclamped from a wooden mould, the spoon could be trimmed, filed and polished to render it smooth in the hand and the mouth. Schaverien illustrates metal spoon moulds, along with a range of curved blades for scraping the insides of spoon bowls and smoothing the edges after moulding.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Schaverien, *Horn*, 157–8, Figs 166–7. The National Museum of Scotland’s website lists over 164.

⁵⁰ Schaverien, *Horn*, 43–57, 157–160, Figs 165–7.

Some Scots householders made their own, or male travellers made them and their womenfolk sold them nearby and at markets. A saying from Scots folklore is revealing of attitudes to itinerant horn-spoon makers: ‘Horners are ay horners’ was interpreted by Buchan to mean ‘The maker of horn spoons is always looked on as outside the law.’⁵¹ Grant noted that travellers tended to be secretive about their manufacturing techniques.⁵² In 1957 a pale horn spoon inset with silver, was donated to the museum by Rev. Dugald Macfarlane.⁵³ It had been commissioned from a traveller by the doner’s mother for his seventh birthday in 1877, and his description of its manufacture is worth quoting in full. Dugald explained to the curator that he watched the traveller throughout the process: ‘How he cut the horn into three stripes. A medium dark horn. Then boiled it in Mrs Mac-Dougall’s hens pot then beat it and flexed it then put it into his spare mould of wood with one half a bump and the other a hallow [sic] and jointed with a leather thong. Then it was lashed down at the free end and the horn trimmed with a little sharp crooked knife and allowed to cool and set. Finally, when it was cold, it was taken out and scraped and polished again and again and finally when it was all done a silver sixpence was beaten and a little thistle cut from it and planted in the front of the shank of the spoon. Dugald said, “It was my birth day but I’d rather have had a whip however I’d seen it made and it was my spoon”.’⁵⁴

Horners in Ireland

Records of people working and trading in horn in Ireland are elusive. Benjamin Ellison, an ‘Inkhorn Turner’, appears in land deeds in 1724—the earliest known named Irish horner.⁵⁵ In 1750 John Bourk was rewarded with a guinea by the Dublin Society, ‘for making Lanthorn leaves’ for [sic] horn.⁵⁶ Those selling ‘gads and horn spoons’ in the market at Ballina in June 1827 were expected to pay a toll of one penny per day, for that privilege.⁵⁷ A lone ‘Horn dealer’ appears in the 1901 census for Waterford, the same year that George McCarthy (originally from Killarney) is listed as a ‘Horn manufacturer’ in the census

⁵¹ Buchan, *Scottish tradition*, 192.

⁵² Grant, *Highland folk ways*, 188, 192, Fig. 32, 248.

⁵³ Highland Folk Museum Reg. No: SKA 105 (1957.19).

⁵⁴ *Highland Folk Museum, Davidson Catalogue* (1955–1963), 8.

⁵⁵ Makers’ Card Index Files, NMI., Benjamin Ellison, Inkhorn Turner, 29 September, 1724, Land Deed No.27030 p. 92 vol.41. Schaverien, *Horn*, 215–6.

⁵⁶ *Dublin Society Minutes*, 13 December 1750 (RDS Library & Archives). See forthcoming, C. Kinmonth ‘Rags, riches and recycling: the visual and material culture of the Dublin Society 1731–1781’ in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, XXI (2018).

⁵⁷ A schedule of the rate of tolls and customs payable in the town of Ballina June 1827. Tolls and customs: schedules of fairs and markets throughout Ireland: (Ireland) Accounts and Papers 13 Vols -(8)- relating to Ireland *viz* charitable and public institutions tolls and customs. Session 5 February-23 July, vol. 26, 1830 (Bodleian Library, Oxford).

for Cork.⁵⁸ Subsequently, both George and his son Joseph list their occupations as ‘horn and bog oak worker’ in the census of 1911, while his wife, Harriet, appears as a dealer for their goods.⁵⁹ Patrick Keane gives his occupation as ‘horner manufacturer and shopkeeper’ in the 1911 census return for Athlone,⁶⁰ presumably selling his own horn products. Such activities may have been a cleaner end of the trade, closest to the finished product. It seems likely that horn spoons were not only sold at markets in Ireland, but also by hawkers or travellers, as they were in Scotland. Writing about travellers in the 1820s in Britain and Ireland, Harriot lists their usual occupations as ‘basket and mat making; fabricating needles, bodkins, nets, carpets, sieves, besoms, and foot bosses; grinding and cutlery; turning or making troughs, trenchers, dishes, and spoons; farriery and horse dealing; braziery...’.⁶¹ Travellers provided services and hawked an ingenious range of tempting items door to door around the countryside, beyond easy reach of shops.

It is likely that moulds similar to the Scottish ones were used in Ireland too, where they may survive, awaiting identification, in museum collections. Descriptions of Irish horners’ techniques are elusive, but proximity, migration and shared materials suggest many Scottish tools and techniques would have been used by Irish makers. Accounts of making walking stick handles, from the FSCS collection (1937–38), shed light on some Irish methods: ‘A ram’s horn is got and boiled in a pot of water for about two hours. It is taken out and twisted while hot into any shape required’.⁶² The Irish word ‘*laiphaid*’ was defined in 1821 as ‘an instrument used to form horn spoons’ suggesting that batches of spoons were being moulded in Ireland by then.⁶³ A description

⁵⁸ National Archives of Ireland: 1901 Census of Ireland: County Waterford, 4 Lombard St., Waterford Urban, Edward Waters (age 44) Horn dealer; Cork County, 5 Gillabbey St., George McCarthy (age 57) Horn Manufacturer (<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>, accessed 23/04/2018).

⁵⁹ National Archives of Ireland: 1911 Census of Ireland: Cork County, District Electoral Division (DED) Cork Urban No. 5, Gillabbey Str., unpaginated, household no. 1, George McCarthy (age 71) Horn & Bog Oak Worker; Cork County, District Electoral Division (DED) Cork Urban No. 5, Gillabbey Str.; household no. 2, Harriet McCarthy (age 54) Dealer in above; Cork County, District Electoral Division (DED) Cork Urban No. 5, Gillabbey Str.; household no. 4, Joseph McCarthy (age 19) Horn & Bog Oak Worker (<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>, accessed 23/04/2018).

⁶⁰ National Archives of Ireland: 1911 Census of Ireland: Westmeath County, District Electoral Division (DED) Athlone West Urban, Connaught Str., household no. 1, Patrick Keane (age 29) Horn Manufacturer & Shopkeeper (<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>, accessed 23/04/2018).

⁶¹ John Staples Harriot, ‘Observations on the oriental origin of the Romnichal, or tribe Miscalled Gypsy and Bohemian’, *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2, no. 1 (1829), 522.

⁶² NFCS (Carrigeengeare, Co. Leitrim) 194: 136.

⁶³ Edward O’Reilly, *An Irish-English dictionary containing upwards of 20,000 words* (Dublin, 1821), unpaginated.

recalling nineteenth-century Galway reveals details of how the horn was finished by comb-makers there: ‘They used have something like a crude knife and split it and allowed it to harden...they used to scrub them with coarse salt. It used to give them a lovely colour, and a lovely shine.’⁶⁴

Typology

A broad typology emerged from the survey of about 120 horn spoons that survive in Irish museum collections. The spoons range from the simple and functional, to forms apparently produced in small batches or even mass-produced, to the overtly fashionable. While there is considerable chronological overlap between these types, the youngest examples date from the 1920s when the advent of other materials in mass production, especially thermosetting plastics, began to compete economically with horn spoons.⁶⁵

‘Natural tip’ spoons

Curvaceous, often droplet-shaped, cut spoons, tagged here for convenience as ‘natural tips’, are some of the simplest. Relatively few survive, perhaps because of the tendency of museums to prioritise elaborate objects. They did not require pre-pressing to flatten the horn and some were made without heat. As such they were well within the capabilities of resourceful householders to make, probably only requiring a knife to slice away a piece of the widest end, at about 45 degrees. The result was a functional spoon. It was economical as it incorporated the narrowest end of the horn, yet was smoother on the lips and far easier to keep clean than wood.

Most of the dozen or so spoons held by the NMI/IAD can be described as ‘natural tips’. A pair of tiny ones (Fig. 6), were unearthed with a horn drinking beaker and a ‘strike-a-light’.⁶⁶ Their maker apparently cut and opened the tip of a small, thin horn, then heated it to flare out a section for each spoon’s bowl without necessarily using a wooden mould. A heavier one, unearthed in Co. Donegal (Fig. 7)⁶⁷ had its handle bent abruptly, twice,

⁶⁴ Records (uncatalogued), from Mrs Anne Geraghty by Ciarán Bairéad, The National Folklore Commission archive, quoted in Tim O’Neill, *Life and tradition in rural Ireland* (London, 1977), 40, 109.

⁶⁵ Clive Edwards, *Victorian furniture. Technology and design* (Manchester, 1993), 55, 91, 134–7; Clive Edwards, *Twentieth-century furniture. Materials, manufacture and markets* (Manchester, 1994), 22–29; Tom Fisher ‘Fashioning plastic’, in Adam Drazin and Susanne Kuchler, *The social life of materials. Studies in material and society* (London, 2015), 119–37: 122.

⁶⁶ J. Raftery, ‘A travelling-man’s gear’, 1–2.

⁶⁷ Although such primitive looking spoons are rare, the Corker More example, fig. 7 (Reg. No: 1959:38) closely resembles another, found two to three feet deep in Rooskey bog, Cloonlee, Co. Mayo, NMI/IAD Reg. No: 1944:253. Described in the card index as a ‘portion of a horn spoon’ in poor condition, it was still put on display.



FIG. 6—Two tiny ‘natural tip’ ox horn spoons; the larger has a groove inside the handle that was the natural groove inside the horn. From a bog at Nahana, Co. Offaly. Courtesy of National Museum of Ireland/Irish Antiquities Division. L. 7.5cm, W. 3.45cm. Reg. No: 1954:93 L. 11.8cm, W. 4.5cm. Reg. No: 1954:92.



FIG. 7—Horn spoon found in a bog at Corker More, Killaghtee, Banagh, Co. Donegal. The end of the stem tapers (towards the tip of the original horn), and wrinkles inside each bend show it was heated then bent, to shape it. L. 11.05cm, W. 5.9cm. Courtesy of National Museum of Ireland/Irish Antiquities Division. Reg. No: 1959:38.

allowing its bowl to be filled completely without the user’s fingers being touched.⁶⁸ A slightly longer, elegant spoon was found in a mural chamber of Staigue Fort, Co. Kerry, an early medieval cashel, though the date of the find is unknown (Fig. 8).⁶⁹

While some were earlier (Fig. 2 and possibly Figs 6–8), most surviving examples are post *c.*1650. In this period, natural tip spoons may have been owned predominantly by people of lower economic status, as they used comparatively

⁶⁸ The author’s handling of such spoons greatly facilitated such observations, and she is grateful to Margaret Lannin and Fiona O’Leary who facilitated access to the NMI collection.

⁶⁹ Cork Public Museum records state that it was ‘found in the wall of chamber opposite entrance’ of Staigue Fort. A. O’Sullivan and J. Sheehan, *The Iveragh peninsula: an archaeological survey of south Kerry* (Cork University Press, 1996), 195. The text reads ‘A horn spoon was found in one of the mural chambers of the chamber in 1956 (KAS), but its present whereabouts is unknown’. By 2018 it was displayed in Cork Public Museum: L1956.4 (loan no. 238 from University College Cork).



FIG. 8—Horn spoon ‘found in the wall of a chamber’ at Staigue Fort, Co. Kerry. Symmetrical and narrowing towards the handle’s tip, it was cut and possibly also moulded, creating an integral bowl reflecting the natural shape of the original horn. The bowl shows wear at the end, from use. Another similar Kerry spoon has a groove round the handle tip, for a suspension cord. L.18cm, W.4 cm, D.1.5cm. Courtesy of Cork Public Museum. Reg. No: L1956.4.

little material and lack decoration. The form lends itself for use as a scoop, as well as a spoon, when necessary (Fig. 9). Examples survive with the hollow tip truncated, which could serve as funnels too.⁷⁰ One comparatively recent example (from the NMI/FD) was apparently used for sugar,⁷¹ while another from a private collection, was discovered by its owner within living memory inside the top of a flour bag, in Ballinasloe.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Armagh County Museum Reg. No: ARMCM.178:1958 with a tip perhaps truncated to enable suspension. Its open-ended tube handle is unhelpful for eating soup, but perhaps easier to keep clean than a closed end. It is closely similar to one from Ulster Folk Museum stores, and another in Hardwick, *Discovering horn*, 122 (described as a flour scoop).

⁷¹ NMI/FD Reg. No; F1965.806, 20cms × 5cms, from Kitchenstown, Hollywood, Balrothery West, Co. Dublin; ‘Sugar scoop made from cow’s horn’. Another smaller ‘natural tip’ scoop shows wear along the leading edge and back of the bowl, suggesting use as a scoop rather than as a spoon (NMI Reg. No; F1935:61, L.16.1cm. W. 8cm. Co. Dublin or Kilmacanoge, Co. Wicklow). The author is grateful to Noel Campbell (NMI) for making related data available.



FIG. 9—‘Natural tip’ type spoon (or scoop). The shape has been altered very little from the original form of the animal horn, except for material being cut away to form the long oval bowl. L. 24cm, W. 6.2cm. Image courtesy of Donegal County Museum. Reg. No: DM1988.281.

Tapered-tip moulded spoons

By far the most commonly surviving and distinctive type has a handle that is broad where it meets the oval bowl, but that diminishes and tapers away towards the end like a long triangle. Often, but not invariably, its end incorporates the narrowest point of the actual horn. This explains why so many of these comparatively robust spoons still have a concave groove along the centre of the broadest part of the handle, where it retains the original thickness and curve of the hollow horn (Figs 6, 10, 22). Here material influences the design, adding rigidity in use. This strength is especially important where the bowl curves to meet the handle, as this is where surviving examples most often show lines of weakness, not only in horn but other materials too. Describing how they were often made by travellers in Scotland, Grant illustrates a tapered-tip moulded spoon alongside a wooden former or mould that she collected in Scotland (Fig. 5).⁷² The incorporation of a horn’s tip reflected material economy, and these ones usually had a dark handle tip fading towards a paler bowl. Knowing this helps to identify them in nineteenth-century Irish paintings, catching the light and the artists’ attention beautifully (Figs 11, 12).⁷³ They were probably among the least expensive spoons, and were the type most commonly used in institutions (Figs 21, 22).

⁷² Grant, *Highland folk ways*, 192, Fig. 32(f).

⁷³ See also Wilkie diaries in Kinmonth, *Irish rural interiors in art*, 58–63, Figs 55, 58 George Washington Brownlow (1835–1876), *The spinning lesson*, 1874, oil on canvas, in C. Kinmonth, ‘Noggins, the nicest work of all’, 132, Fig. 3. See also Scottish print after painting by Sir Edwin Landseer *The Breakfast Party*, c.1847, NMNI Ulster Folk Museum Reg. No: DB1214.3.



FIG. 10—Tapered-tip moulded spoon, formed by heating then clamping the softened bowl into a mould (Fig. 5). The distinctive dark tip gradually paling towards a shiny translucent bowl, is archetypal. This commonly surviving type was produced well into the 1920s. L.22cm, W.5.5cm. Photo courtesy of Armagh County Museum. Reg. No: ARMCM.283.1988.1.



FIG. 11—Detail from Sir David Wilkie, *The Peep-o'-Day Boys' Cabin, in the West of Ireland*, 1835–6, oil on canvas. This visiting Scottish artist's diary admires how the Irish wove their own clothes and caught their own salmon. He was doubtless familiar with horn spoons in Scotland; his vignette of small items includes a tapered-tip moulded spoon beside an inverted a woven wooden noggin, a container used to eat or drink out of. Courtesy of The Tate Gallery, Millbank, London.

Moulded apothecaries' scoops

Highly skilled horners were able to split flat sheets of horn to make several more, much thinner sheets. This must have hastened the batch production of some small items, as thinner horn was easier to cut. Among the items made in this way was a type of scoop (sometimes mistaken for a broken spoon), used by apothecaries (Fig. 13). Some chemists may have preferred horn rather than metal for



FIG. 12—Detail from Erskine Nicol, ‘*As the Old Cock Crows...*’, signed and dated 1850, probably as exhibited in 1851 in Edinburgh. The woman has scraped the basin in her left hand and is flicking the remains of some food onto the ground for her hen. The spoon is a tapered-tip moulded sort (Figs. 10, 21, 22) that is distinctly darker at the end of the handle, and the pale shiny bowl catches the light. Courtesy and copyright Bonhams 1793 Ltd., London, from Phillips Sale 28945/Lot 147 on 28.4.92 Neg H57056.



FIG. 13—Apothecary scoop made of horn sheet that was split into separate thin layers, prior to stamping out with a cutter (Fig. 4), then heated before moulding into the curved shape. Some double-ended examples had a pointed tip on the short end, useful to count pills or handle minute quantities, others were rounded like this. Nineteenth century. L.13.5cm, W.5.8cm. Courtesy Armagh County Museum. Reg. No: ARMCM.177.1958.

measuring out minute amounts, when selling medicine. They ranged in length from 7.5cm to 14.5cm.⁷⁴ The medical profession also used double-ended horn spoons for administering contrasting amounts of medicine to patients (like the plastic ones often enclosed with medicines today), but no Irish ones have come to light.⁷⁵ Several very similar apothecary scoops were identified during this research from different areas of Ireland. They could be used to pick up small quantities of ground-up medicine with the smallest ‘handle’ end, and to ladle out larger quantities using the oval bowl. This is illustrated by the wear at the narrow end of an example from Monaghan County Museum (Fig. 13).

‘Old English’, rat-tailed and fiddle pattern spoons

Aiming for the upper end of the vernacular market, the most skilful horners made spoons with outlines and details closely mimicking those of fashionable silver flatware. Some of these decorative characteristics are regionally specific and can be dated precisely. Access to fashionable flatware by servants was facilitated by their responsibility for handling and cleaning it in aristocratic homes. In his insightful discussion of theft of such eighteenth-century items, Toby Barnard considers their value and desirability.⁷⁶ The latest shapes and styles were visible to many people, including the horn spoon makers, through the window displays of shops that sold silver. Some design details can indicate early dates of manufacture. In silver, fashionable new shapes encouraged buyers to dispose of outmoded flatware, or have it melted down and remade in the latest style.⁷⁷ Irish spoon bowls began to incorporate rat tails from around 1665. However, when one sees a horn spoon with a so-called ‘Old English’ profile, a point-ended handle,⁷⁸ and a rat tail on the back of the bowl, it is imitative of Irish silver spoons of the final quarter of the eighteenth century (Fig. 14).⁷⁹ When a horn spoon with a fiddle pattern outline incorporates a rat tail, it is probably Irish and produced no earlier than c.1800.

The rat-tailed spoon made in horn not only reflects the market for fashionable possessions, at a slightly higher price, but also demonstrates the technical skills of the horner. Examination of a beautifully matched pair of

⁷⁴ Schaverien, *Horn*, 46–51, 159, Fig. 169.

⁷⁵ Schaverien, *Horn*, 178, Figs 193–4.

⁷⁶ Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641–1770* (New Haven and London, 2004), 134–6.

⁷⁷ Fitzgerald, *Silver in Georgian Dublin*, 68–9.

⁷⁸ When featured together, sometimes called ‘French handle,’ according to Douglas Bennett, *Collecting Irish silver 1637–1900* (London, 1984), 106–8, 112–14, Figs. 106–7, 114, shows ‘rat tail backed’ Irish spoons from c.1665.

⁷⁹ Ian Pickford, *Silver flatware: English, Irish and Scottish 1660–1980* (Woodbridge, 1983), 56–7. For an Irish example dated 1785 see John Teahan, *Irish silver: a guide to the exhibition, National Museum of Ireland* (Dublin, 1979), 50, plate 34 (6). Bennett, *Collecting Irish silver*, 106–8, Fig. 107, 114, 117. Hanoverian pattern Irish rat-tailed spoons (with turned up, rounded ends to the handles) date from the 1710s.



FIG. 14—Pair of Old English pattern horn spoons, with downturned pointed handle tips and raised rat-tails on the backs of bowls, imitative of idiosyncratically Irish silver examples of the late eighteenth century. From Larne, Co. Antrim. L. 26.2cm, W. 5cm. Courtesy and copyright National Museum NI. Collection Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Reg. Nos: HOYFM.756:1971 and HOYFM.757.1971, Horn spoons.

horn spoons from Co. Antrim shows how carefully their maker exploited the contrasting colours found in adjacent layers of horn to show off, and give prominence to, the rat tail in a lighter shade. Uniquely, because of the translucence of the horn, it is visible from both sides (Fig. 14). This pair is a rare survival because such spoons are more fragile and less intrinsically valuable than their silver equivalents. Marginally more common in Irish museum collections, perhaps because they are more robust, are the slightly later fiddle pattern spoons. Of these, only some have the rat tail on the back of the bowl. One of a matching set of four elongated ‘fiddle pattern without shoulders’ spoons in golden-coloured horn from Co. Antrim (Fig. 15) are reminiscent of a set of silver examples from Dublin hallmarked in 1758.⁸⁰ One of them has been carefully repaired by fixing a patch over a break in the narrow centre of the handle.⁸¹ Other surviving examples follow the same fashionable outline but are thicker, and seem to have been stamped out of a horn sheet but not

⁸⁰ Pickford, *Silver flatware*, 56–7, Fig. 49. In Irish silver, early fiddle pattern illustrated here without shoulders, predates when fiddle pattern starts to occur in England.

⁸¹ Early repairs (as opposed to museum conservation) are revealing of owners’ desires to invest in keeping artefacts in use, rather than discarding them. A horn ladle in the Ulster Folk Museum collection, for example, incorporates a wire staple across the split bowl. Excessive or asymmetrical wear, reflects the value of such items and can reveal details regarding its use, such as whether the user was right- or left-handed.



FIG. 15—Set of four fiddle or oar pattern spoons, also known as fiddle without shoulders. First made fashionable in Irish silver during the second half of the eighteenth century. Each has a rat tail behind the bowl, and shows signs of wear and even professional repair (third from left). Cut and moulded, small chamfered details were then carved around the upper surface of each stem. From Newtonabbey, Co. Antrim. L. 25.5cm, W. 5.6cm. Courtesy and copyright National Museum NI. Collection Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Reg. No: HOYFM.281.1975A/B/C/D.

subsequently carved or chamfered, and lack the rat tail.⁸² In interior domestic scenes it is common to see fiddle pattern spoons displayed at eye level on the dresser (Fig. 1). In many cases, they were probably of horn rather than silver.

Spoons with incised decoration

Certain types of surface decoration are peculiar to the materials upon which they are applied. So vernacular chair makers chose paint to imitate inlay or marquetry, and horn spoons appear with patterned surfaces, which are reminiscent of the engraving found on silver, but could have been done with knives or gravers. Surface decoration on horn often wears away with handling. This section considers three spoons with relatively well-preserved surface decoration. The first two are very similar. One from Galway, which is illustrated here (Figs. 16, 17), is in the NMI's Folklife Department, while the other, from Derry, and in the Ulster Folk Museum's collection, is less precisely made.⁸³ They have very unusual elongated narrow, parallel-sided handles, rarely observed in other

⁸² Armagh Co. Museum Reg. No: 2120 'fiddle pattern' horn spoon.

⁸³ Two examples: NMI Reg. No: F:1971:258 7 and NMNI Reg. No: 593.1966, L.26.5; handle slightly curved and tapered, bowl L.7.25cm × 5.5cm, criss-cross pattern on upper



FIG. 16—Moulded and carved horn spoon with criss-cross engraving in contrasting panels along the top of the handle. Its almost square-section stem has comfortable chamfered edges and stepped shoulders where it abuts the bowl. Late seventeenth century. L. 23cm, W. 5.5cm. Courtesy of National Museum of Ireland/Folklife Division, Reg No: F1971:258.



0 3 cm

FIG. 17—Engraving of back of bowl of spoon in Fig. 16, with mirrored feathering curving outwards and diamond shaped terminals, the central motif of curved, parallel overlapped lines, slightly asymmetrical. Reminiscent of straight-stemmed, late seventeenth-century silver spoons with stamped 'lace back' decoration. Courtesy of National Museum of Ireland/Folklife Division. Reg. No: F1971:258.

surviving horn spoons. The Galway example is expertly carved and shaped with precise steps at the base of its handle. The profile of the handle is similar to those found on mid-seventeenth-century Irish silver spoons whose 'stems were straight and had six or eight sides'.⁸⁴ Late seventeenth-century silver

surface of handle repeated three times. Gifted to the museum by Mr John Gillespie from Derry. The author thanks Stephen Dennison for providing data.

⁸⁴ Bennett, *Collecting Irish silver*, 106, Fig. 104.

'lace back' spoons appeared when French fashion dictated that spoons were laid on the table with their backs showing. This horn version is decorated around the edges of the bowl back, whereas its silver counterpart was usually decorated in the centre of the back (Fig. 17).⁸⁵ Both spoons are also decorated on the top surface of the stem (Fig. 16) in a manner reminiscent of some of the early, or archaic-looking, chevron and crossed line decoration on Irish vernacular furniture and especially on methers.⁸⁶ The less elaborate Derry example has this repeated three times in separate rectangular blocks along the top of the handle, adjacent to the bowl, centrally, and at the end of the handle. Each set of diagonal crossing lines is framed by a pair of parallel straight lines, across the width of the handle.

The third example with incised decoration is a small black horn tea-caddy spoon from Co. Antrim. Its distinctive fiddle pattern silhouette dates it firmly after 1800, and its size is imitative of silver caddy spoons (Fig. 18). Presumably used infrequently for dry tea leaves, it survives in a pristine state. Its distinctive surface decoration stands out clearly on shiny black horn, whereas this is harder to discern inside the worn bowl of another early seventeenth century example, from Limerick.⁸⁷ The top of the handle is symmetrically divided with a herringbone pattern of lines, linked to a central 'ring-and-dot' motif.⁸⁸ Across the shoulder, where the handle meets the bowl, double lines form a saltire cross.⁸⁹ Patterns composed of loops and crosses flow around the inside of the bowl. Such archaic chains of dots or dashes, in pairs, also occur in the bowls of some Scottish spoons, differ to silver flatware decoration, and may be characteristic only on horn. A horn spoon considered to be early seventeenth century, from Limerick, has the same distinctive looped dotted decoration inside the bowl.⁹⁰ Experiments by jeweller Michael Duerden to replicate this pattern, using a narrow chisel (as wide as the dots are apart, with a straight cutting edge), showed how perfectly it can be replicated by rocking the chisel from side

⁸⁵ Pickford, *Silver flatware*, 75–77, Figs 73–4, 76–8.

⁸⁶ Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, Figs 161–2, 164, 219, 236–7, 319.

⁸⁷ Limerick Museum Reg. No: 0000.0249: Amber horn spoon of tapered-tip moulded type, dated c.1600–1650 in the museum's notes, similar in outline to Figs. 10, 21–22, with closely similar double dot, looped decoration inside the bowl. The author thanks Brian Hodgkinson and Matthew Potter for data and photographs.

⁸⁸ For much earlier examples of 'ring-and-dot' decoration see, P. Wallace, *Viking Dublin*, 292, Fig. 8.21, 349, 419, Fig. 11.38., 445; MacGregor, *Bone, antler, ivory and horn*, 54, Figs 48–51, 54; M. Dunlevy, 'A classification of early Irish combs', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 88C (1988), 341–422: 348–9. Hardwick, *Discovering horn*, 60.

⁸⁹ Similar herringbone decoration appears on the handle of a fiddle pattern dark horn table spoon from neighbouring Co. Down, which also has rows of tiny dashes cut between each double line: NMI/FD.F1931:92.

⁹⁰ Collection of Limerick Museum Reg. No: 0000.0249, L.19.9 × W.7.9cms. Some spoons, for example in the Highland Folk Museum, share these paired dots in their bowls.



FIG. 18—Tea caddy spoon of black ox horn with brown flare in bowl. Fiddle pattern with shoulders (came in on silver from c.1800). Archaic decoration of looped double dot patterns inside the bowl seen on other spoons from Limerick and Scotland. L. 10cm, W. 3.5cm. From Ballywattick, Ballymoney, Co. Antrim. Courtesy and copyright National Museum NI. Collection Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Reg. No: HOYFM.708.1966 Horn Caddy Spoon.

to side, rhythmically, while pushing it forwards across the horn surface.⁹¹ The corner of the chisel easily makes tiny marks in close pairs, as seen here, and the curves are created by turning the chisel slightly. Tighter loops would be impossible with this method, which quickly creates impressive-looking decoration. The influence of technique on design is therefore clear, and if more examples come to light regional variation may emerge.

Twisted stem decoration and ladles

While twisted stem spoons were uniquely suited to being made from horn, as illustrated by examples from Germany,⁹² no Irish examples have come to light.⁹³ An extraordinary twisted stem ladle is therefore included here to illustrate the capabilities of horners (Figs. 19, 20). Horn ladles would have been unsuitable

⁹¹ Experiments to replicate this pattern on various metals and materials, using scorpers of different widths, were carried out in 2017 by Co. Cork jeweller Michael Duerden, MA, in collaboration with the author. This work facilitated greater appreciation of the execution of this seemingly complex surface pattern.

⁹² Schaverien, *Horn*, Figs 162–3.

⁹³ Whalebone (or baleen) is also twisted to form the long decorative handles of punch ladles, with bowls of silver. See, for example, Pickford ed., *Jackson's silver and gold marks*, 188, Fig. 331.



FIG. 19—Twisted horn ladle similar to an example (from NMI) in darker horn, with two twists in the stem rather than three occurring here, and slightly different in its carved detail. From Glengormley, Newtonabbey, Co. Antrim. L. 32.2cm, W. 11.9cm. Courtesy and copyright National Museum NI. Collection Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Reg. No: HOYFM.282.1975.



FIG. 20—Detail of horn ladle (in Fig. 19) to show triple twist on stem. The risk of delaminating is greatest when horn is bent acutely, so such virtuoso work elevated its maker beyond the capabilities of ordinary horners, and probably commanded a higher price. Courtesy and copyright National Museum NI. Collection Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Reg. No: HOYFM.282.1975.

for stirring, serving or cooking anything very hot. From about 1660 onwards it became fashionable to drink punch,⁹⁴ which at that time was not served hot, so the market for associated paraphernalia was considerable. Silver punch ladles were widely made from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. Some had lathe-turned wooden handles, and often their oval bowls were set crossways to

⁹⁴ Teahan, *Irish silver*, 25.

facilitate serving liquids.⁹⁵ Ox horn was available in large enough pieces to make elegant, curved ladles. Robbie Burns, the famous Scots poet from Ayr, used such a long-handled ‘toddy ladle’ of pale horn, but his has no twist.⁹⁶ The Ulster Folk Museum has some fine horn ladles, including a fiddle pattern form, and another that incorporates a hook (cut integrally and bent from the horn itself) near the top of the back of the handle. Such a hook prevented the ladle from slipping into a bowl or pan in use, and enabled it to be hung up, on display. These hooked ladles are reminiscent of large, idiosyncratically Irish, silver basting spoons, which often had a ‘turned-over handle’, forming a hook.⁹⁷ Ladles made of horn as well as of wood and metal would reward further research.

To make the twisted ladle, pressed horn sheet was cut to the basic outline before removing a long rectangular strip from the centre. After heating again, this central part was twisted once or twice and fixed into a clamp to cool and harden (Fig. 20). Subsequently, the pointed end of the long stem was decorated with symmetrical chip carving, and pairs of projections remained close to the twisted section, which added decorative strength where the long-grained keratin might otherwise have tended to split. Two examples survive in separate museum collections indicating that, rather than being a one-off, it was a decorative saleable product, influenced by the potential of the material.⁹⁸ As a centrepiece to flourish during the popular ritual of drinking punch, it was less expensive than a high fashion punch ladle of silver. The two similar horn examples differ because one has a double twist on the long shank, while the paler example illustrated here has a slightly tighter triple twist. Examination of the latter shows that the grain of the keratin was cut diagonally, rather than longitudinally, presumably adding strength where the stem joins the bowl.

Discussion

The social significance of horn spoons

A description of farm animals from Co. Leitrim in 1937 recalls an old saying, ‘A cow is good living or dead. When the cow is living she gives...us milk, and when she is dead she gives us beef. Spoons are made from her horns...’⁹⁹ Nothing was wasted; bone was collected door to door by pedlars, and even

⁹⁵ Pickford, *Silver flatware*, 188, Figs 330–31 also 201, Fig. 201 shows smaller ‘Toddy ladles’. The twisted whale bone example, is similar in outline to the horn ones illustrated in Fig. 19 here.

⁹⁶ Robert Burns Birthplace Museum Reg. No: 3.5504 Horn Ladle, The terms ‘Punch’ and ‘Toddy’ (then served cool) are both used by the museum linking the ladle with a ceramic punch bowl (Robert Burns Birthplace Museum Reg: 3.4015).

⁹⁷ Pickford, *Silver flatware*, 56.

⁹⁸ The only two Irish twisted ladles that the author has discovered are: NMNI.282:1975 (from Co. Antrim), light horn, with three twists (Figs. 19, 20); and NMI/FD Reg. No: F.1971:255, dark horn, with two twists, ex Swan Bequest (original location unknown), L.26.8 × W.8.5cms.

⁹⁹ NFCS (Meenymore, Co. Leitrim) 196: 44.

the cow's tail was useful in the making of a white-wash brush.¹⁰⁰ A revealing account mentioning spoons from times of famine originates from Co. Cork: 'Twas a very usual habit for the poor travellers and people in Famine days to have a spoon in their pocket and when they go into a house where a pot of gruel would be boiling to steal a spoon of hot gruel when the woman of the house would have her back to the fire or be gone outside for some purpose such as turf or water.'¹⁰¹ An old song, called *The Lemgare Ragman*, comes from the National Folklore Commission's Schools' collection. It provides further insights into privation, as well as the fundamental advantage of owning a spoon:

I have travelled all Ireland from top to the bottom,
I have attended all weddings and wakes near and far
But the greatest of all that I ever attended,
Was the death of a Ragman that died in Lemgare.
There was a wee grain of meal in a bag in the corner
It was shook on the pot for the boys that came far
But two greedy fellows with spoons in their pockets
Put an end to the porridge that night in Lemgare.¹⁰²

Horn spoons answered to peoples' needs. They were lighter and probably far less expensive than their metal equivalents. They did not retain heat so were appropriate for use by children or invalids. An account of the possessions of linen and cotton weavers in Glenavy, in the parish of Camlin and Tullyrusk, Co. Antrim in 1819, illustrates the value of horn spoons. People there who possessed one or perhaps two chaff beds and one or two looms or spinning wheels for their livelihood, owned a diminishing list of smaller furnishings 'such as a tub, a piggin, a can, and two or three noggins; and a few knives, and horn spoons'.¹⁰³ Though last, perhaps because they were the smallest, the presence of horn spoons on this short list is significant.

In most poor rural Irish households, the formality of consuming meals sitting at a table and eating with a range of cutlery was unnecessary, when, until the early twentieth century, many rural people still survived on a diet dominated by potatoes. Those more affluent families who partook regularly of meat, were more likely than most of the rural poor, to acquire a range of eating utensils, but in most households the spoon was by far the most common type. A traveller impressed by the spoons' importance related how, in 1728, he

¹⁰⁰ NFCS 192: 95.

¹⁰¹ Ned Buckley, Knockagree, Rathmore, Duhallow, Co. Cork NFC 1071: 77–154 quoted in Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine echoes. Folk memories of the Great Irish Famine*, Ch. 5, unpaginated.

¹⁰² NFCS (Moys Otra, Co. Monaghan), 936: 99.

¹⁰³ William Shaw Mason, *A statistical account, or parochial survey of Ireland: drawn up from the communications of the clergy of Ireland* (Dublin, 1816), Vol. 2, 246–7.

‘travelled from Dublin to Dundalk’ and ‘went into a principal farmer’s house, out of curiosity and his whole furniture consisted of 2 blocks for stools, a bench each side of the fireplace made of turf, 6 trenchers, 1 bowl, a pot, 6 horn spoons, 3 noggins, 3 blankets, 1 of which served the man and maid servant: the other the master of the family, his wife and 5 children. A small churn, a wooden candlestick, a broken stick for a pair of tongs.’¹⁰⁴ The absence of any other cutlery is significant, as is the fact that nine people shared so little, with just six horn spoons between them all. The comparative importance of horn spoons is similarly revealed, light-heartedly, by Carleton, in 1833, when he describes meagre possessions being divided up between father and son in readiness for marriage: ‘...four stools, of which Phelim was to get two; two pots—a large one and a small one—the former to go with Phelim; three horn spoons, of which Phelim was to get one, and the chance of a toss-up for the third...’¹⁰⁵ An Irish saying further emphasised how cherished functional implements were in everyday life, and was coined when someone in a good job died. There was ‘a noggin and spoon for someone else’.¹⁰⁶

Cultural links, especially between northern counties of Ireland and neighbouring Scotland, are of long lineage. Specific objects also illustrate common design, for example idiosyncratic chairs, costume and drinking methers in wood, silver and horn.¹⁰⁷ Horn, rather than metal, was preferred for spoons in Scotland. Called ‘luppacks’, ‘gibbies’ or ‘cutties’, in Dumfries and Galloway in the eighteenth century, ‘Each person in the family had a short hafted spoon made of horn, which they called a munn, which they supped with, and carried it in their pocket, or hung it by their side.’¹⁰⁸ Some Scottish horn spoons had a whistle cut into the tip of the handle, like a few collected by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and more from the Isle of Mann.¹⁰⁹ Scots folklore augments what the museum objects show: ‘Better the suppin’ end nor the

¹⁰⁴ J. Swift and T. Sheridan, *The intelligencer*, ed. J. Woolley (Oxford, 1992), 89–90 quoted in Barnard, *Making the grand figure*, 85.

¹⁰⁵ William Carleton, *The courtship of Phelim O’Toole (6 Irish Tales)* (Dublin, 1833, 1962), 23.

¹⁰⁶ NFCS (S. Wexford, 1938), 591/2: 36; (Teacher Muris Mac Gearailt, Buckode, Co. Leitrim, c.1930s), 191: 18.

¹⁰⁷ Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, 51–2, Figs 59–62, 199–200, Fig. 319. Kinmonth, *Irish rural interiors in art*, 182, 219.

¹⁰⁸ Bernard D. Cotton, *Scottish vernacular furniture* (New York, 2008), 277–8. Special boxes used to hold these horn spoons are similar to some found in northern counties of Ireland, for example, Figs 514–6.

¹⁰⁹ For example from NMNI/Ulster Folk and Transport Museum stores, Horn Spoon with dark handle and paler bowl, Accession number: SCH.2015.770, NN(SS)‘O’17.

whistle end'.¹¹⁰ Likewise, drinking vessels from both Scotland (luggies) and Ireland (methers) occasionally incorporated a double bottom, allowing a rattle to be made with the insertion of a pebble or a dried pea. Both ideas must have given the makers of such plenishings an advantage over their competitors in the market place. Contemporary Scots makers of such objects now suggest that the whistling spoon enabled a small child to signal to his or her mother, out of sight in the byre, when more food was wanted. For the same reason, a baby might also rattle a luggie or a mether¹¹¹ as a signal, once the vessel was empty, or it may have had a similar use in a public house.

Shape and status: high fashion in low fashion materials

The trickle down of highly fashionable items of furniture, from examples owned by the Irish aristocracy, is widespread and familiar in design history. So the Ribband back chair with its elaborately pierced back splat and horizontal cresting rail (resulting from the use of early mahogany in the skilled hands of Thomas Chippendale, published in his *Director* of 1754¹¹²), soon appears in a simplified form in less expensive oak, and is recognisable in drawings of Dublin street sellers as early as 1760.¹¹³ In the same way, the Regency sabre-legged chair, highly desirable in rosewood or mahogany, with its seat caned or upholstered, quickly re-establishes itself in the parlour of the Irish farmhouse, its front legs having a distinctly curved outline. But for durability, and to make it last generations, the country carpenter often added incongruous stretchers between the legs, and a sturdy board seat. Native beech, oak, pine or mixed timbers were usually scumbled, and grained in a distinctive dark mahogany red, upgrading it in imitation of more expensive hardwoods. Traditionally, graining was the way to dress up cheap materials in furniture making, and a slightly straighter version of the generously curved sabre leg set the vernacular parlour chair apart from the *súgán* chairs commonly favoured in the kitchen. Servants have always been able to observe new fashions at first hand, when working in the so-called 'big house', where they were accommodated in settle beds and press beds, which then grew more popular in farmhouses than in the homes of the planted settlers

¹¹⁰ Buchan, *Scottish tradition*, 192. Surviving Scots whistling spoons often had silver added to the handle tip to form the whistle. Those from the Manx Museum, Isle of Man (perhaps used by fishermen in fog) were less lavish; the whistle was integral to the horn handle end.

¹¹¹ Cotton, *Scottish vernacular furniture*, 276–7, Figs 551–2. Luggies are Scottish wooden staved vessels, each with one stave longer to act as a handle, broadly similar in size and function as the Irish Noggin.

¹¹² Thomas Chippendale, *The gentleman and cabinet-maker's director*, 3rd edition 1762 (reprinted New York, 1966), plate XV; Christopher Gilbert, *The life and work of Thomas Chippendale* (New York, 1978), 65–92.

¹¹³ William Laffan ed., *The cries of Dublin, drawn from the life by Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760* (Dublin, 2003), 94–5, 102–3, plates 20, 24.

where they began.¹¹⁴ The striving of servants to imitate the fashions of their employers (usually in cheaper textiles), may well have helped to drive innovation in high fashion, as the aristocracy had the means and desire to look different. Even the bustle and the corseted waistline makes its appearance in the working environment of the farm house soon after being worn by aristocratic women.¹¹⁵ Similarly, the imitation of the most fashionable details and outlines of silver spoons in horn, enabled working people to keep conspicuously abreast of fashion, yet at lower cost.

Spoon display

This role was reinforced by the prominent display of fashionable horn spoons in openwork spoon boxes (especially in the north of Ireland and Scotland) or on dresser shelves. Positioning them visibly but beyond reach also protected them from hungry animals such as dogs, pigs, rats, mice and insects, for whom the keratin was a welcome source of protein; this, indeed, must be an important factor in the poor rate of survival of horn spoons.¹¹⁶ Like the practise of hanging babies' cradles from rafters, it helped avoid damage from the animals that co-habited many dwellings (Fig. 1).¹¹⁷ Some Irish farmhouse dressers incorporated special holes for their display. Irish interior paintings sometimes show four or five spoons slotted into a shelf front at eye level, deliberately attracting attention (Fig. 1). The author's examination of dressers frequently revealed hidden rectangular slots (often overlooked by the dresser's owner), usually concealed behind the shelf's decorative moulding, at eye level.¹¹⁸ Recourse to art history revealed how each spoon was hung with its bowl uppermost showing above the shelf line, and its handle pushed vertically down through the slot, visible below.¹¹⁹ A household in Mayo, in the absence of a dresser, used a hanging straw mat instead, with spoons stuck into the open spaces.¹²⁰ Simultaneously, such display served multiple purposes. It provided a safe place to keep precious spoons (many dressers

¹¹⁴ Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, 82–91.

¹¹⁵ Artist unknown initialed J.S.W. 'Irish sketches: breeding poultry to pay the rent', *Illustrated London News* (28 April 1888), 462.

¹¹⁶ Hodges, *Artifacts*, 155.

¹¹⁷ NFCS (Donore, Co. Meath), 0682: 129. 'Wooden spoons ... in a small box on the wall ... divided into two parts, the spoons were kept in the back division and the salt was kept in the front.' C. Kinmonth, 'Irish vernacular furniture: inventories and illustrations in interdisciplinary methodology', *Regional Furniture*, 10 (1996), 1–26: 7–8, Figs 6 and 8; Cotton, *Scottish vernacular furniture*, 277–8, Fig. 516; P. Lysaght 'Livestock kept in the dwelling house: nineteenth and early twentieth century evidence for the practise in Ireland', in O'Connell, Kelly and McAdam eds. *Cattle in ancient and modern Ireland*, 75–91.

¹¹⁸ Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, 113–15, Figs 168–9, 171–3, 180.

¹¹⁹ Kinmonth, *Irish rural interiors in art*, 54–7, Figs 25, 49–52, 55, 185, 191.

¹²⁰ NFCS (Tulrohaun, Co. Mayo, 1937–8), 109: 502: a straw mat was 'hung on the kitchen wall for holding the cutlery which stuck into the open spaces in it'.

lacked cutlery drawers), allowed them to air dry after washing, and showed them off proudly, invariably at eye level, as items of conspicuous consumption. As the aesthetic centrepiece of the Irish kitchen, the dresser, itself a status symbol, was purpose-built to protect and show off wares and utensils to best effect. People made the most of what little they had. The way pot lids were arranged brightly polished, then decorated with coruscating spirals, made by pressing and twisting ones' thumbs, is a further reminder of aesthetic priorities.¹²¹ Recollections from 1913 describe how 'the great wide dresser...is laden with pewter plates and horn goblets, and bright flowered delf [sic] 'with the wooden wall box for horn spoons, hand-made at the tanneries, and hawked around the country by chapmen'.¹²² Spoon boxes may be more commonly found in those northern Irish counties, closest to Scotland, along with many other similar details of display.¹²³ How things were washed up, then displayed, applied similarly to noggins. These staved wooden vessels, took time to dry, so were designed to be displayed simultaneously upside down on a dresser shelf.¹²⁴ Both wood and horn benefit from dry storage, to reduce damage from insects.

Feeding institutional inmates

Horn spoons were also ubiquitous within institutions. The regular acquisition by Irish prisons of a broad range of necessary things, is apparent from nineteenth-century advertisements inviting proposals or tenders from outside suppliers. Institutions such as workhouses, schools, hospitals, barracks, asylums and orphanages needed to procure such spoons economically.¹²⁵ A few spoons (and noggins) which survive bearing identifying marks, are reflective of such institutional use.¹²⁶ In County Antrim Gaol prisoners were issued with clothes 'upon which their number is stamped in large white letters'.¹²⁷ So a horn spoon hot-branded with a number 8 (Fig. 21), is indicative of the same practise. Another

¹²¹ C. Kinmonth, *Irish rural interiors in art*, 43, Figs 43–5.

¹²² E. Walford, J.C. Cox, G.L. Apperson 'Old Irish plenishings', *The Antiquary* 49 (1913), 183.

¹²³ David Jones, 'Living in one or two rooms in the country', in A. Carruthers ed., *The Scottish home* (Edinburgh, 1996), 37–58: 46.

¹²⁴ Kinmonth, 'Noggins: the nicest work of all', 146–7, Fig. 13.

¹²⁵ *Dublin Evening Post*, 17 Nov. 1832; *Dublin Morning Register*, 3 May, 27 October 1842; *Saunders's News-Letter*, 21 April 1819, advertisement requesting 'Proposals for supplying the gaols of Newgate, Sheriffs' Prison, and Richmond Penitentiary... until Michaelmas Term next, with bread, potatoes, coals, straw, buckets, brooms, oil, blankets, soap, glazing, tables, forms, beds, trenchers, spoons, noggins, baskets, meal and oaten meal, and whitewashing all the prisons...'; *Freeman's Journal*, 13 September 1849; Kinmonth, 'Noggins, the nicest work of all', 142–3.

¹²⁶ Kinmonth 'Knowing our Noggins: rare Irish wooden vessels rediscovered', *Folk Life*, 55 no. 1 (2017), 46–52.

¹²⁷ A. Day and P. McWilliams (eds), *Ordnance survey memoirs of Ireland*, vol. 37, parishes of County Antrim XIV, (Belfast, 1996), 105.



FIG. 21—Tapered-tip moulded spoon, marked number 8 with a hot brand, probably issued in a workhouse or a prison, where each inmate was allocated certain possessions. Very few survive still bearing letters or numbers. Nineteenth century. L.22cm, W. 5.5cm. Courtesy of Armagh County Museum. Reg. No: ARMCM: 4.1999.

extremely worn spoon, from Donegal, is marked by four letters, suggestive of an owner's or an institution's initials, 'O R L N', inside what remains of the bowl.¹²⁸ Such extreme wear is revealing for it reflects one spoon's value within poor society, or if indeed it came from a prison, the very frugal conditions many inmates had to endure.

The survival of horn spoons right up until the 1920s in Irish prisons might have been forgotten had it not been for the habit of political prisoners to keep things as 'souvenirs around which memories could be recounted' of their heroic confinement.¹²⁹ Enough survived, marked or scratched with prisoners' names and dates, and subsequently given to museums, for each to embody an individual significance of its own. The choice of horn for some spoons in institutions seems not simply to have been for reasons of economy. In prisons, horn was perhaps less likely to be refashioned into a key or a weapon, than metal. However, this did not prevent such implements being put to use by prisoners intent on escape. One such escapade referred to five IRA prisoners who 'went up to the warders and, hands in pockets, pretended to be covering the warders with revolvers. They ordered them not to speak or move. The warders obeyed, although the 'revolvers' were simply horn spoons which were served out to the prisoners.'¹³⁰ Even though the British forces removed almost everything when they departed from Dublin's Kilmainham Gaol in 1922, the museum there still owns several spoons, some of horn.¹³¹ Another horn spoon survived because it was kept by Eithne Coyle (1897–1985), a member of *Cumann na mBan* who was imprisoned in Mountjoy Prison, then escaped with it, over the wall in October 1921 (Fig. 22).¹³² In the late summer of 1923 'a tunnel was dug...by female republican prisoners in the basement laundry in Kilmainham Gaol'. After the 'herculean task' of lifting flagstones 'they shovelled out the

¹²⁸ Listed with drawing in the card Index files of NMI/IAD Reg. No: F.1931:177, L. 14.6cm.

¹²⁹ Joanna Brück 'Nationalism, gender and memory: internment camp craftwork, 1916–1923' in L. Godson and J. Brück, *Making 1916: material and visual culture of the Easter Rising* (Liverpool, 2016), 101–03.

¹³⁰ F. O'Donoghue, *IRA jailbreaks 1919–1921* (Cork, 2010), p.78. The author thanks Michael Duerden for drawing her attention to this and other spoon-related information.

¹³¹ The donor of two such spoons claimed 'that all spoons used in the prison were made of horn instead of metal.' He lived in Kilmainham Gaol between 1912 and 1913 while his father was caretaker. The author thanks the curators, Niall Bergin and Aoife Torpey, for data on two horn spoons displayed at Kilmainham Gaol Museum: Reg. No: 10PF 3F11 06. The letters inscribed on the horn spoon on display in the museum in 2017 (Archive Ref. No. 21PF-3F11-09) are as follows: Along the handle, the initials HNO I D(?), In the bowl, the initials FIN, Reverse: Number 1039. Eithne Coyle's horn spoon: Reg. No: KMGLM 2018.0002.

¹³² Eithne Coyle's reminiscences and witness statement, recount her escape from Mountjoy in 1921 (War of Independence): 'Reminiscences of Eithne O'Donnell (nee Coyle) 12/7/72', Kilmainham Gaol Museum Ref. No: 20MS-1B33-19.



FIG. 22—Tapered-tip moulded horn prison spoon, issued to political prisoner Eithne Coyle, *Cumann Na mBan*, who carried it when she escaped over the wall of Mountjoy Prison on 31 October 1921 (along with fellow prisoner Constance de Markiewicz’s metal spoon). L. 19.8cm, W. 5.5cm. Fourth Northern Division Collection. Courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum Reg. No: KMGLM 2018.0002.

earth (with spoons)’.¹³³ Mountjoy convict prison was known to keep prisoners occupied by allowing them to work at various jobs. Two uniformly opaque, dark brown horn spoons from the Kilmainham collection, are thought to have originated in this way. Several others—all predominantly of the ‘tapered-tip moulded’ variety originating from prisons—survive, pointing to another potentially rewarding area of research.¹³⁴

¹³³ Margaret Buckley, *The jangle of the keys* (Dublin, 1938), 101: ‘The flagstones were four or five inches thick, and the crevices were encrusted with dirt, and hardened with age. The lifting of the first stone was a herculean task, which only brave hearts would tackle, when they had shovelled out the earth (with spoons) they were able to stand in, and work more comfortably, and they got used to it, it went quicker with them.’

¹³⁴ Four horn spoons listed in NMI Art and Industry Division. Their Reg. Nos follow (then prisoner’s name, prison and date): HE:EW.1176 (James E. Lynch, Mountjoy, 1921), HE:EWT:409 (John Kavanagh, Mountjoy?), HE:1998.127 Peadar Clancy, spoon now owned by Irish Military Archives at Cathal Brugha Barracks), HE:EW.2547 (Peter Howley, Mountjoy, 1917) The author thanks Audrey Whitty (NMI) for locating these spoons. Limerick Museum holds 2 prison spoons described by the museum thus: 2007.0157: Spoon, horn. Inscribed, MI. Conway Prisoner of War/ 1920 Kilkenny Prison 1921. 2015.0100; Spoon, horn. Taken by Thomas Dargan from Curragh Camp, 1922–23.

Conclusion

This study of horn spoons in Ireland reveals impressive resourcefulness on the part of makers and users of these uniquely functional yet necessarily intimate objects. They were made by amateurs as well as by specialist horners. They may also have been mass-producing in highly-mechanised workshops with many employees, though no example has yet to be identified in Ireland. At the lowest economic level of society, the spoons reflected Ireland's food culture, frequently consisting of stirabout, soup, stew and porridge, and often produced from the one pot over the open hearth, in times when other food was scarce.

The 'natural tip spoon' was barely altered from the natural horn's form. Their potential to double as scoops, simply added appeal, like numerous other multi-functional vernacular items. These may be the types referred to in accounts of privation, which were pocketed, to avail of a mouthful of soup from any pot. Bending horn acutely was difficult, so the diminutive pair unearthed at Nahana (Fig. 6), with handles raked upwards, avoided that challenge. The ubiquitous concave dark horn tip as the handle of the most commonly surviving type, the 'tapered-tip moulded' spoons, arises from material economy (Figs 10–12, 21–22). Functional and strong, they required only one heating stage to make, saving fuel and labour. The solid tips were the strongest, as well as the cheapest, part of the horn, so these spoons were more durable than those moulded from pressed horn sheet.

The benefit of a spoon that was smooth and shiny, and far easier to clean than wood, was crucial in houses lacking piped water. For those in slightly more comfortable circumstances, their desire for conspicuous consumption is evident in sets of rat-tailed spoons, their smooth translucence in fashionable outlines, sleekly made by professional horners. The repairs and wear evident on some of these decorated spoons suggests they were for use, not simply for show (Figs 14, 15). Spoon boxes and kitchen dressers framed peoples' desire to care for and display conspicuously their precious utensils; but exactly how much they cost remains elusive. Apart from one black caddy spoon, which still looks pristine (Fig. 18), most horn examples would have looked more beautiful new than they do now, as they roughen with age, though can be re-polished. The functional plinishings of well-kept kitchens included wall hung potlids with coruscating patterns twisted onto their surfaces, and plates resting onto bars to prevent dust. Similarly, horn spoons, when first displayed, must have shone alluringly, adding to the bright spots reflecting firelight. A lot was made of what little people owned. The use of pressed horn, rather than tips, represented higher initial material cost, and virtuoso examples with twisted stems, in various colours, would have commanded still higher prices (Figs. 19, 20). The apothecaries' scoops, stamped from horn sheets cleverly split into layers, survive, from enough different places, to suggest they were used widely, though proof that they were made in Ireland is elusive (Fig. 13).

Knowledge of the craft of the horner is established for England, and to a certain extent for Scotland, but deserves more research in Ireland. It is hoped that illustrating tools from England and Scotland may help spotlight unidentified

horners' tools in Irish collections. The peripatetic and often illiterate travellers feature in references to spoon-making and selling, but the legacy of the objects they made is greater than that of written records pertaining to them. The stench of the horners' working conditions around shambles, contrasted starkly with the translucent elegance of the spoons they produced, perhaps explaining why their wives, rather than the craftsmen themselves, hawked them from door to door. Within the design history of vernacular artefacts, named craftspeople can be elusive, so the census reports detailing specific horn manufacturers and their families, are especially illuminating. Use of horn for institutions was undoubtedly economical, as well as safer than metal. Names of prisoners when linked to spoons, bring these humble objects to life, even when simply numbered or initialled. They are lack-lustre compared to the rat-tailed examples, but the expertise of the horner, knowing how to heat the horn without turning it opaque, was not a consideration in prison. By the 1920's they seemed primitive, when elsewhere plastic was taking over.

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