

Memories on a Monday: Washday – sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive

Monday 23 March 2020

Following our Weekend Wonder post, welcome to our first daily post this week from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive – when we choose something from our collections to reminisce about, learn something new, or simply wonder and ponder. We are sharing our heritage whilst we need to be inside.

In bygone years, for those of you who remember – and for those who don't - Mondays was always washday. It was once a week, taking up the whole day (usually). Washday for some families could easily start as early as 5 or 6 in the morning. With large families to care for, and no washing machine to help, there was little time for much else. Meals would be cold leftovers, leaving more time for the washing.

When schoolchildren come to Bruce Castle to find out how we handled housework in the past, here are some of the objects they get to handle at the Museum – some of these will perhaps be very familiar to some of you.



Here we have a mangle (watch those fingers!), and a scrubbing board in a small zinc tub. Just out of shot are some washing tongs and the strong-smelling carbolic soap (plenty will remember this being used as they grew up through the 20th century - right up to the 1970s even - as the household soap of their childhood: very pungent, tar-like scent and bright pinkish-red colour. These were the days when water was heated in the [copper](#), agitated by a [posser](#) in a [dolly tub](#) and then passed through the mangle. Hanging the clothes out on a line pinned on by clothes pegs, or drying on a clothes horse, before ironing with a [flat iron](#).

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For a description of what Washday was like in the 1920s and 1930s by Leonie Kitchener (born 1921), see the attached oral history (PDF) from our collections.

Laundries

For those that could afford it, laundries helped with washing clothes, providing work for local young women especially.

Here are some photographs from the early 20th century (below) :



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The two photographs (above and below) show the Hale Laundry, 187 Philip Lane in Tottenham, c.1908. From about 1903 until c.1913 Miss Lottie Hale ran her laundry business. She is pictured here dressed in black, posing with her employees. Apart from domestic service, laundry work was often the only opportunity available for young girls and women to contribute to their family's income. These premises were bare but functional with a wooden extension at the rear full of large scrubbing tubs, mangles and laundry baskets. In the scrubbing, mangling and ironing of laundry, these women endured work that was physically very demanding.



And about the same time, here is an advert for the Wood Green & Hornsey Laundry (from the Wood Green Guide, 1910)

For the BEST LAUNDRY WORK.

OPEN-AIR DRYING.

We use 4 million gallons of water yearly.

Punctual Collection and Delivery.

WOOD GREEN & HORNSEY LAUNDRY



Our Shirt and Collar Ironing and Shaping Appliances give an exceptionally beautiful finish to gentlemen's linen with the minimum of wear.

PRICE LISTS POST FREE.

The Wood Green and Hornsey Steam Laundry, Ltd.,
ALBERT ROAD, WOOD GREEN, N.

The Wash-House

The local councils for Tottenham, Hornsey and Wood Green provided public wash-houses where you could do your laundry. Here are a series of photographs from the 1940s.



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And another reminiscence:

“The Tiverton Road wash-house was one self-service style laundry. The family wash would be sorted into two piles - white things in one pile, coloured things in another - and put into pillowcases or sacks ready to be transported in the family pram or push-chair round to the wash-house.

At the wash-house, the attendant—man or woman—would collect your money and give you a metal token or ticket. Then you sat and waited ‘til a machine was empty. A large boiler would take all the ‘whites’ and then the washing was transferred to big stone sinks or zinc baths for rinsing. Many women would take their own zinc baths and washboards as there was no hot water at home.

Coloured items would be washed by hand while the whites were boiling. ‘Oxydol’ and ‘Clozone’ were popular bleaching agents for white washing.

After washing, the clothing etc would be put in the ‘hydro-extractor’ to be spun dry. Then the washing was arranged on wooden racks for drying. The racks were tall and mounted on tracks in rows. A handle pulled out each rack, the washing was draped over the rails, then the rack was pushed back into the drying area. There were arguments over people using racks allocated to someone else.”



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For the last word on wash-day, a few reminiscences that were collected in 2004 by Hazel Whitehouse for Bruce Castle Museum – this time, women remembering their old washing machines and electric irons, which became more commonplace from the late 1960s onwards.

The women reminiscing were: Olga Lowe b.1922, in British Guiana, Barbara Welch b.1931, Olive Cope b.1920, Eve O'Brien b.1928, Kathy Redman b.1925.

Washing Machines:

Barbara: We had a 'Hoover', a single tub with a wringer. Got it at the Co-Op, I think, in the High Road, corner of Lansdowne Road. We saved up and bought it, nothing on the 'Never-Never'.

It was electric. There was a hose that took the water out into the sink and you put the hose on the tap to get the water in; the machine heated the water. We only had cold water taps. Took about an hour to heat the water and while it was warming up you sorted the washing into whites and coloureds. There was a paddle inside the tub to agitate the washing about, the washing came out all twisted up, it was terrible. Took about half an hour to do a wash.

I used Persil. Took the washing out of the machine to rinse it in the sink. It washed, it didn't rinse. Used 'dolly Blue', Reckitt's, for white things, and all rinsed

by hand and then put through the wringer. The wringer was on top of the machine and folded away inside when you finished. After use, I wheeled it into the cupboard under the stairs. We hung the washing in the garden to dry if it was fine.

Ironing:

Eve: I had a Thorn's "Mary-Ann" iron. Egg-shaped, it did seams properly. It was electric, but heavy. No steam irons then.

Barbara: I had a Morphy-Richards, electric with a little green light which lit when it was on, and a little dial for different types of cloth. And an ironing-board.

Kathy: I ironed on the table, kitchen table. Folded up a blanket with some sheeting to iron on. Got my first ironing-board with Green Shield stamps. The washing was done at home, using a copper in the kitchen or scullery to boil the wash, rinsing it by hand in zinc baths, and then putting items through the mangle. Some women used the public wash-houses, and those that could afford it sent items to the local Laundry. Drying was done outside in the garden or in front of the fire in the kitchen. Washing-machines did not become common until the 1960s.

Olga: When I was young, back in Guyana, everyone had their job to do, sweep the yard or something. You did it. And you didn't throw your clothes down on the floor, you had a nail and you had to hang your clothes on it.

We did the washing on the washboard, scrubbing it, and we had blocks of soap. And the white clothes we spread on the coconut branches and the sun bleached them. You had to wash and 'blue' and rinse. It take all week to do the wash. Sheets and tablecloths.

Kathy: I used to love washing and ironing. Because you can see the result of your work. And I had to do the ironing just right, the boys' shirt collars, they had to be right. And using the 'Reckitt's Blue' to whiten them, and you had starch. My mum had two lines out in the garden and you weren't allowed to walk between them when the washing was out. My mum had a lot of washing with all of us. We were always clean and well-turned out. We all had our jobs to do at home.

Olive: I did the hand washing in the sink with a washboard, the sheets and that I sent to the laundry, and then a launderette opened. I remember the first day it opened it was a free wash and they were queuing right over the street. Towels and sheets I took to the launderette, the clothes I washed.

Our launderette cost 2/6 in the machine, and 1/- to dry it, at the launderette in Tottenham High Road.

Eve: We had no washing-machine. I did the washing in the bath in the room off the kitchen; water fed into it from the copper. Water tank in the bathroom. No heating in there.

And that's the end of Memories on a Monday: Washday – a different topic and different aspect from our collections tomorrow, with a guest contributor.

Stay well
Best wishes

Deborah

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