

Knocker up stick



Fully extended knocker upper – updated storyline

Objects in Museums can have many stories attached to them. Sometimes these stories can be found in unexpected places but still point to mysteries waiting to be discovered. This 'knocker-upper stick' is one such object in our collection. We know that it was donated to the museum by one of the local doctors – Dr O'Dwyer – in 1968 and the account of its use, described below, came to us from him. There is another chapter however, at the end which hints at a much more interesting history.

We often forget that there was a time when mechanical alarm clocks were unreliable and expensive. Now battery clocks, smart watches or phones and digital clocks, are more commonly used to remind us when to get up and go to work. During the Industrial Revolution your livelihood frequently depended on being at work on time.

So, what did you do if you were expected to work different shifts in factories driven by modern industrial machines, or indeed by the tides in maritime environments, if you had no clock to tell you when to get up?

The answer is that you employed a 'knocker upper', a human alarm-clock¹. The job began to be a regular trade and was a respected profession as it was important to be reliable. These men and women were paid by each client and they only wanted to wake 'their' client so they had sticks – or sometimes, pea-shooters – with which to target the right windows in the houses in the street. It seems that they were mostly employed in industrial

¹ <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/knocker-upper-47bc8c5bfbdf>

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cities, and it was not until 1973 that the last knocker upper retired in Bolton, Lancashire².

Until the 1860s the mechanised weaving factories were not a feature in Newtown and it is likely that the hand-loom weavers who worked in our building used all hours when there was light, and had no need of a knocker upper to wake them, but we have a carved knock-up stick from Lancashire as part of our collection. Our beautifully carved but functional stick – shown above when fully extended to 2.64m - has an important history and the carving on the handle demonstrates how cherished it was.



² <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-35840393>

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In July 2022 the BBC series Antiques Road Show was preparing to record an episode at Powis Castle. As always, the producers encourage people to take along items of interest and our Curator, John Evans thought it would be worth asking one of the team's experts about our 'knocker-upper'. It was examined by Ronnie Johnson-Morgan and caught the attention of the presenter, Fiona Bruce. On the day of the show's recording, Fiona used the stick as the final object to wind up the show, but sadly that segment did not escape the editing process and was not included when the episode went to air in April 2023.



It appears that its origins were not in Lancashire, but in Japan. The main body is carved bamboo, and the telescopic extension is possibly Japanese lacquered cane, and Ronnie thought it was probably a nineteenth century fishing rod. A search for images on the internet brings up photos of carved walking sticks and gadget canes, which are similar, but nothing with the sort of beautiful carving that appears on our stick.

So I think we can probably rule out the thought of our stick being made in Lancashire, but we are none the wiser about whether it came from Japan in the 1800s and was thought to be an ideal implement for waking the factory workers, or perhaps it travelled to Wales in the post-war period with Dr O'Dwyer and family lore converted it into the 'knocker-upper'.