



The Once-ubiquitous Latex Collecting Cup

by Ian Anderson

My first visit to Malaya was in 1960. It was a very different place in those days, with no high-rise buildings or highways. Local life was very simple for all but the rich, with several families sharing one house (and one bucket toilet), very few cars to cause traffic jams and the bicycle was still the main form of private transport. Trishaws plied the town streets and a journey from KL to Penang, along narrow roads fringed with literally millions of rubber trees, each with its own latex collecting cup, became a 7-hour adventure. Travelling slowly, as it was generally impossible to safely overtake that lumbering lorry that barred your way, it was nonetheless interesting for all but the driver.

The rubber trees, standing in long, straight lines, like soldiers on parade, were regularly interspersed with idyllic kampung houses on stilts, each with their fruit trees, chickens and children playing in the dust. From time to time one would also pass through the very centre of small towns like Kampar or Ipoh (where it was always worth stopping to buy those famous Pomeloës by the roadside). Today of course, as we hurtle along the highways, bypassing the towns, there are still a few rubber plantations that have not been overtaken by the boom in oil palm and consequently those latex cups are still there – but God forbid, they are now made of plastic, for gone are the days of individuality in materials and design. Cheapest is now best.

The story of rubber in Malaya starts in 1877 when Sir Hugh Low became the British Resident of Perak. An amateur botanist, he planted seven rubber seeds in the compound of the District Office, Kuala Kangsar in 1882 – one of these original trees still stands as a monument to his foresight and interest in all things botanical. Subsequently James Nicholas Ridley, as the first Scientific Director of Singapore Botanical Gardens, nurtured the idea of large-scale rubber production in Malaya and soon the largest rubber growing country in the world became a reality. He was truly the father of Malaya's rubber industry.

But what about those latex cups and the part they played in the industry? Well of course, like everything else they initially came from Britain. The earliest ones that we have

identified are marked "Battersea Triangle"; Battersea being a suburb of London. These came in two sizes, were roughly finished, fired earthenware, with a very unusual mouth. They probably date from the very beginning of rubber planting in Malaya. As rubber production grew in popularity, coffee estates switched to the more valuable produce while many new rubber estates were also planted.

In parallel, the latex cups took on their own particular styles, shapes and materials. The size, originally measured in ounces (now ml), also changed continually to accommodate the ever increasing flow of latex due to the efforts of the scientists of the Rubber Research Institute of Malaya (founded in 1925). Incidentally, we believe that it was these very same scientists that used our smallest cup (a treasure at just 1.9 inches tall) to test the flow of their experimental saplings.

Following on from the Battersea Triangle, there have been many forms of latex cups, some with plantation names embossed or incised in them, (thus recording the existence of the plantation) others completely faceless, but nonetheless interesting for their shape, size and colour. One of the most fascinating of these is the one that is the spitting image of the female breast, complete with nipple artistically protruding from the base. These have been found in both china and glass and often sport a company mark. We have never established any good reason for manufacturing them in this form but it seems likely that the nipple was to fit into a special holder fixed to the tree. To date, no such holder has yet been identified by us. However there is a much better reason provided by the old-time planters who tell us, with a smile, that they were to prevent the tappers taking them home to use as bowls

for their table!

Having mentioned the glass variety above, it is timely to point out that glass was used extensively across the country to manufacture latex cups, not only with nipples, but also as cones, bowls and even drinking glass forms. The latter no doubt finding their way to the rubber tappers' kitchen. Primarily of clear glass there are also samples made in varying shades of yellow (sometimes almost brown). At first glance, many of these varieties look the same, but a close inspection shows there are several variations particularly with the glass domes. Some have the plantation name embossed or incised in the bottom while others have various features close to the lip to accommodate specialist fixing to the tree.



Nipple-inspired latex cups from Guthrie and HAPM

Returning to those made from china, in a similar way to glass they come in many shapes and sizes, but apart from the famous nipple, most are in the standard shape of a cup with a flat bottom. It seems these soon transformed into the cheaper material of part or fully glazed pottery, of a similar shape, the

colour of the glazing varying from manufacturer to manufacturer and estate to estate. We also understand that aluminium cups were used for a while although we have not yet come across any examples of these. Again there is evidence of polythene bags being tried out in the 1970's but these were apparently a dismal failure. Finally, the industry turned to plastic and although pottery cups are still in evidence around Perak, it is the plastic version that provides the majority. Mass produced by the tens of thousands they can be found in many plantations, not only on the trees, but damaged and discarded, waiting to biodegrade over the next 500 years or so!

The latex cups featured here all belong to IpohWorld, a heritage project within Tenby Schools, Ipoh. You may wonder why a heritage organisation would collect such mundane items and consider them as part of our heritage. However, once you recognise that your heritage is everything that was on this earth when you were born and that whatever you destroy during your lifetime will rob your descendants of that heritage, I hope you will understand our strategy.

As a final thought, I turn to that well known idiom "One man's trash is another man's treasure". Perhaps it would have been more apt to have said "One man's trash is everybody's heritage" for heritage is not in private ownership, it belongs to us all.