

Victorian Kitchen Treasures



Design Thinking

A cast iron decorative can opener, on display in the kitchen at Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich.

The use of cans to store and preserve food (sometimes called tinsplate boxes) was first invented in the early 1800s, but it was a while before a method was invented specifically to open the cans, other than by using a hammer and chisel!

The first can opener is widely thought to have been patented in England by Robert Yates in 1855. These were basically a lever with a short blade and a handle. However, a simple 'lever knife' may have been in use earlier than this date.

Later, more decorative designs became popular, such as the head of a bull. This was sometimes called the 'bully beef' opener, referring to the popular 'bully beef' meat inside the can which was often a kind of corned beef.

Surprisingly, the more well-known rotary can opener (one that grips onto the can as you twist the top) was first produced in the 1890s and is very similar to the ones we use today.

Look at the photograph of our can opener above. Notice the spike at the top of the bull's head? This would be used to stab a hole in the top of the can before using the curved knife at the bottom to lever all the way around the can (wiggling it back and forth) to open it.



Have you ever used this type of can opener before?

Ask some much older family or friends if they ever used a can opener like this and find out what it was like to use.



Can you think of any problems or dangers associated with this type of can opener?

Why do you think we use rotary or even electrical can openers these days?



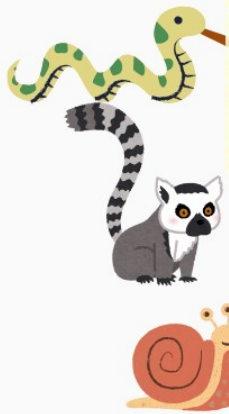
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Design Challenge

Design your own animal-shaped can opener.

Draw your design and add labels to explain the features.



Which animal will you choose?
It might be a pet, a favourite wild animal, or a creature that has a body shape that you think will work well.



How will you design the handle to look beautiful but also to be practical to use? Notice that the bull's head can opener pictured has a smooth curve, ending in the animal's tail.



How would you make it safe to use but still able to open a can well?

What materials would you use and why does this matter?

