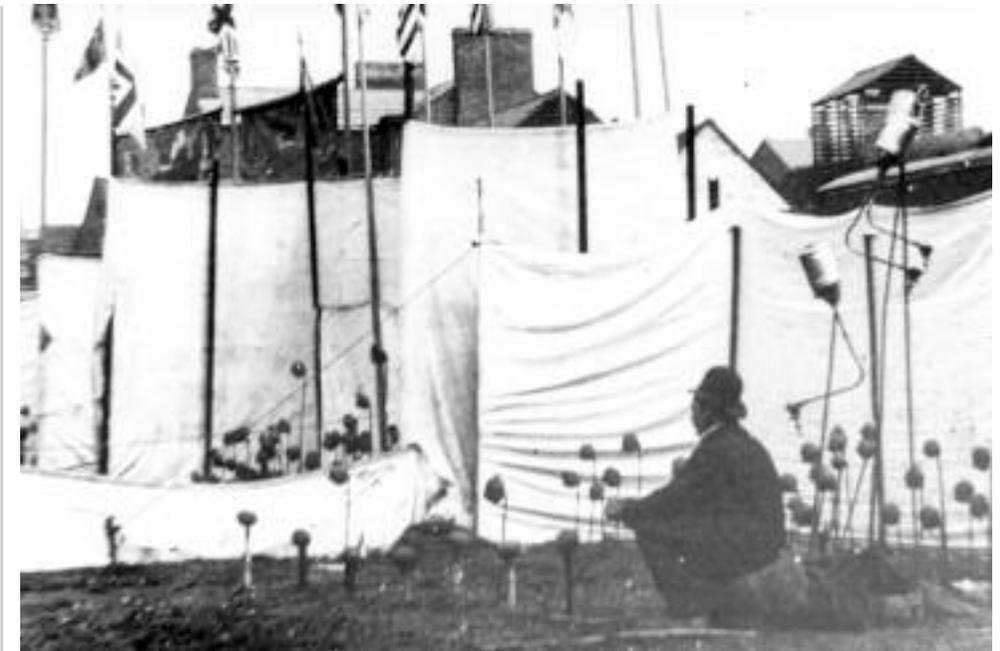


# Fun Made The Fair Coconut Shy

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1. Coconut shy, circa 1890. University of Sheffield National Fairground Archive.



From an internet message board: “You don’t have coconut shies? It’s a fairground game, where coconuts are set up on posts and one has [to] throw balls at them and knock them off to win them” (BBC America 2003).

Golfers know the phrase “Close, but no cigar” when their putt just reaches the edge of the hole and fails to drop in. Or they may say “Close, but no coconut.” These phrases originated in fairgrounds where cigars or coconuts were prizes in the booths where balls were thrown at a clay pipe or the open mouth of an “Aunt Sally” face. As the *Surrey Comet* in England reported on Saturday November 16, 1867, “The Pleasure Fair, held for the first time in the Fairfield [Kingston-

upon-Thames] was larger than has been known for years . . . For the small sum of one penny, you could have three throws with sticks with the prospect of getting a cocoa nut, a doll, a pencil case, or some other such useful article . . . Then for a penny you obtain the privilege of trying to throw a ball into a gaping mouth, which when done, would entitle you to receive a cocoa nut, and you were assured you could ‘crack it and try it’” (Anon. 1867).

The coconut soon became a popular prize: “. . . in nearly every country fair [Fig. 1], and in almost all the open spaces round London at holiday seasons, the cocoa-nut plays so conspicuous a part that every child is acquainted with it, most children have eaten it, and large numbers have tasted the thin, rather insipid liquor that is the ‘milk’ in a very deteriorated condition” (Treloar 1884). Treloar drew attention to the coconut’s increasing domestic involvement in popular British culture and, in particular, to a novel role: “The origin of the now neglected game of ‘Aunt Sally,’ also an importation from the tropics, may be attributed to the cocoa-nut; and at any rate the cocoa-nut ‘shy’ has superseded it by providing not only for the amusement, but the cupidity of the patrons of ‘three sticks a penny.’ It has also nearly superseded the more ancient ‘cock shies’ where the prizes were pincushions, knives, toys, and painted tin snuff-boxes – just as these covetable articles took the place of the gingerbread and gilded fowls that in earlier days displaced the live cocks at which the brutal part of the population threw sticks on Shrove Tuesdays” (Treloar 1884). The throwing sticks were themselves displaced by wooden balls and the coconut became “. . . familiar as the reward of the popular English amusement of ‘throwing at the coco-nuts’” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1911). But just exactly when, where and why did the coconut become both the target and the prize? The evidence is not obvious but the clues lie in the proximity of a particular public house to three water mills that made mats, candles and button polish.

According to records in the Local History Room of the North Kingston Centre in Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, near to London, there were water mills from the earliest recorded (Saxon and Doomesday) times on the river Hogsmill, a tributary of the Thames. Originally these mills ground flour from local crops but the Middle Mill, which was operating on the banks of the Hogsmill River at least as early as the 1600s, ceased flour production in the early 19th century and became a “cocoa fibre works” where “coarse fibres from the outer shell of coconuts were made into mats and brushes” (Biden 1852, Sampson 1985). According to Sampson, Middle Mill started to use coconut fiber (coir) to make matting in the 1840s, a period now identified with the start of the coconut plantation industry in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and elsewhere (Child 1974). Before the end of the 19th century, Treloar could write “There are a good many people still living who can remember when a Cocoa-nut was a comparative rarity in some parts of England. In a few old country mansions, or on the mantel-shelves of retired sea-captains, and occasionally in London curiosity shops, might

be seen strangely-figured goblets, with rims and feet of silver, and so wrought that here and there they were thin and almost translucent, that there was a gleam upon their rich, dark surfaces which gave them the appearance of being formed of some rare stone. These were made of the shells of the great cocoa-nuts, wrought in graceful or grotesque patterns by some patient native, or by an ingenious sailor on the long homeward voyage” (Treloar 1884). These shells were from both the coconut and the coco-de-mer (*Lodoicea maldivica*).

Beautifully engraved coconut shells had indeed reached Britain in the 11th and 12th centuries, often mounted in silver or gold and set with precious gems (Fritz 1983). According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art the “exotic coconut, or ‘Indian nut’ as it is called in Renaissance inventories, had been collected and displayed as an object of ‘miraculous powers’ in the treasuries of pagan temples since Greek and Roman antiquity . . . The coconut’s curious form and obscure origin in faraway lands supported the idea of using the odd shell of the nut as a medicinal antidote. For instance, poisoned wine could be neutralized by drinking it from a coconut used as a cup . . .” (Anon. 2003). In the 16th century, when Queen Elizabeth I encouraged her naval captains to capture Spanish ships laden with treasure from the East, one such vessel, the *Madre de Dios*, had a cargo of: “. . . elephants teeth, porcellan vessels of China, coconuts, ebenwood as black as jet . . .” (Gleeson 1998). Yet the coconut was still a rarity in England in the 17th century (Grew 1681) and when, in the 18th century, the “Coconut Tree” became the meeting place for Tory politicians (Colley 1977) and a tax was levied on the “cocoa-nutts” that were imported at Christmas (National Archives 1786), the “cocoanut” in question was, in fact, the bean from the pod of *Theobroma cacao*. Dr. Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* confused the issue by combining entries for the nut (sic) from the chocolate tree (Spanish = cacao) with the nut from the palm tree (Portuguese = coquos) to give “cocoa” (Johnson 1755).

However, from the middle of the 19th century onwards the “cocoa-nut or coker-nut” (Coker-nut was in commercial use in the Port of London to avoid confusion [Child 1975]) as the fruit of the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera* L.) was variously known, began to be imported in quantity. “Mr Poole stated [in Statistics of British Commerce] that in 1850 the imports were 1,575,000 nuts, or the enormous weight of 1575 tons; and be it remembered the cocoa-nut is merely used as a luxury, chiefly by children, and is not imported for any other economic purpose . . .” (Archer

1854). Unbeknown to Archer, writing at that time, there were already other economic purposes for the coconut as the source of valuable raw materials for the Industrial Revolution in Britain. But these uses were scarcely a dozen years old when those words were written. Within a few more decades, the coconut palm was included in popular science treatises, such as the *Dictionary of the Economic Products of India* (Watt 1889), *The Uses of Plants: a Manual of Economic Botany with Special Reference to Vegetable Products Introduced During the Last Fifty Years* (Boulger 1889) and *Commercial Botany of the Nineteenth Century* (Jackson 1890). As Treloar explained, "Writers who expatiate on the enormous growth of importations and the development of trade in various foreign commodities during the last sixty or seventy years, point, among other illustrations, to the immensely increased consumption of the oil extracted from the cocoa-nut, of which an enormous number of tons reach this country from Ceylon; but few of them refer to the consumption of the cocoa-nut itself, as an indication of the advance of commercial enterprise" (Treloar 1884).

The emerging economic interest in coconut was reflected by two social events at the very start of the 1840s – the marriage of Queen Victoria to Albert Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and the christening of their first child. In 1840 Price's Candle Company introduced a cheap candle "For the purpose of the general illumination on the occasion of Her Majesty's marriage . . . that should require no snuffing, composed of a mixture of stearic acid and cocoa-nut stearine. The public . . . received the new composite candles with great favour, and the manufacture rapidly grew" (Jackson 1890). The christening of Victoria's first child Albert Edward (Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII) was remarkable for the fact that the floor of the hall of St. George's Chapel at Windsor ". . . was covered first with a matting made of the husk of the cocoa-nut" (*The Times* 1842). These two events would have helped stimulate the Kingston mills' commercial involvement with coconut.

Good, cheap candles were essential before homes were lit with gas or electricity "To the men of the mid-nineteenth century, the improvement was a major one" (Asimov 1964) and "So rapid did the utilisation of cocoa-nut oil become after the establishment of the company just referred to [Price's], that they turned out in the month of October, 1849, twenty tons of cocoa-nut candles, of the value of £1,590, and about twelve tons of stearic and composite candles, valued at £1,227. In October 1855, the quantity of stearic and composite candles made by the firm amounted to 707 tons, of the value of £79,500" (Jackson

1890). Price's Patent Candle Company was located at Battersea in 1840, and it had been from Battersea in 1776 that an oilman, Stephen Wedge, converted the upstream Chapel or Leatherhead Mill at Kingston into an oil mill to process linseed (Sampson 1985). Even if the Battersea connection is coincidental, the Kingston oil mill would appreciate the commercial possibilities of using coconut oil to make candles.

Following the interest in coir matting that was stimulated by Prince Albert Edward's christening, the Great Exhibition in 1851 was "the means of giving a further impetus to the trade" (Jackson 1890) when the general public could see for themselves the qualities of these mats displayed amongst the colonial exhibits. Coconut matting factories appeared in many parts of Britain. "The Patent Cocoa Fibre Company (Limited) the only cocoa-nut fibre manufactory in Surrey. All description of Cocoa Fibre MATTING, plain, bordered and [f]ancy in stock and made to order wholesale. Cocoa Fibre, Bass, and Whisk Brushes of [all] descriptions" (Anon. 1877).

It seems likely that at the very beginning of the coir matting trade in the 1840s it would have been the whole coconuts that were imported. "Only the nuts themselves were articles of commerce, and they were scarce. There was but a limited demand for a luxury, a little of which, even among schoolboys went a long way" (Treloar 1884). Subsequently, as trade developed, "Cocoa-nuts have become an ordinary article of commerce in markets and many fruiterers' shops, but still the outer husks and shells are comparatively out of sight. Probably many people may still fancy that they are not brought here with the nuts in any considerable quantity, nor would the majority even of Londoners easily estimate the enormous consumption of the nut itself" (Treloar 1884). In the 1840s, whole coconuts, consisting of the nut inside the fibrous husk, would have been easy to load on board sailing ships or steam ships returning to Britain from the tropics and easy to transfer to barges or lighters going up the river Thames from Fish Street Hill in the City to the confluence with the Hogsmill River at Kingston. However, it seems that Middle Mill may have ceased to process coconuts in 1880 when it was sold to Kelly & Co, printers (Kelly's subsequently became well-known for producing very comprehensive trade directories). The Chapel Mill is certainly recorded to have made candles with whale oil before becoming part of Price's in 1895 (Sampson 1985). Superficially it might seem that the coconut connection was broken; perhaps by the end of the 19th century the imports of coir fiber and copra and coconut oil from the colonies

no longer made it economic to carry out the primary processing with local labor. Even the final product was threatened and the Society of Coconut Fibre Mat and Matting Weavers met in February 1875 to protest about the use of prison labor to make cheap mats. "Although the Kingston works turned out a greater variety of goods than could be produced in prisons, the Company felt it was being put at an unfair disadvantage with regard to mats and matting. By the end of that year, the Cocoa Fibre Company was seeking to wind up its business, although permission was not, at that time, granted" (Anon. 1901).

To begin with, the coconut fiber factory in close proximity to an oil mill processing linseed would have been able to incorporate flax fibers, a waste product from the linseed plants, into some of its products. Likewise, the oil mill could have extracted coconut oil from copra (the dried kernel) of coconuts if these were available from the coconut fiber works. Moreover, the 1842 tithe apportionment showed that the Chapel Oil Mill and the Middle Mill were both owned by one man, Joshua Lockwood (LHR 2003). In July 1872, following Lockwood's death, the premises were put up for sale with an existing tenancy "let to Messrs Hardcastle & Wilson, Cocoa Fibre Manufacture on lease 20 years . . ." The matting mill manager, William Wilson, was a local man (LHR 2003), and it would be a further coincidence if he was related to the Wilsons of Price's.

If Lockwood, Hardcastle or Wilson ever did import whole coconuts and process the husks to coir fiber at Middle Mill and the kernels to copra and coconut oil at the Oil Mill there would still be residues that, unlike flax fibers, could not be incorporated into existing products. These were the coir dust that accumulates when the fibers are beaten from the husk, the copra meal that remains after the oil is extracted and – above all – the bone-hard coconut shells – split into two cup-like halves when extracting the copra.

Today, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (and not far from Kingston) encourages the use of coir-based soil amendments to reduce the exploitation of peat-moss reserves from endangered wetland locations. Yet this material was available to the Kew gardeners as long ago as 1877, when "Coconut fibre refuse for garden purposes" could be "Fetched from mill in carts or vans at 4d. per bushel; in quantities of 50 bushels or over, 3d. per bushel" and "Sent to all parts of the kingdom by rail in bags or by truck" (Anon. 1877). The copra meal would also have found a ready sale to local farmers for chicken and animal feed.

That would leave only the coconut shell "cup" which would be of no value in industrial Britain.

In tropical communities they are burnt in the very process of making copra, but there is always a surplus of shells. To this day, even when activated carbon from coconut shell charcoal is economically valued as a purifying and absorbing agent for pollutants, great piles of coconut shells accumulate wherever copra and coconut oil are produced. The Middle Mill manager might have found ready outlets for coir dust and copra meal but the unused piles of shells would have remained as mountainous monuments for many years because the impermeable material would survive in a cold climate even better than it already does in the tropics.

When the Middle Mill ceased to make mats the Oil Mill could still import copra for crushing and in 1895 it is recorded to have used whale oil for making candles (Sampson 1985). It was at about that time that a third mill on the Hogsmill river at Kingston, the Hogs Mill itself, may have become involved with coconut. The last firm to work Hogs Mill, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was Johnston and Co., who advertised corn flour on the same page as the cocoa-nut fiber advertisement in the 1877 issue of the *Surrey Comet*. From 1895 the Hogs Mill began production of "Yewsabit" (Fig. 2) – a polish that was said to be putting a shine on most of the British Army during the Boer War (Sampson 1985). The firm's trademark was a drummer boy of the British Guards – an appropriate choice, considering that the War Office was the firm's biggest customer (Sampson 1985). According to an article the *Surrey Comet* for 1901, "Yewsabit" was a paste made from "five secret ingredients" and advertised as the "King of Metal Polishes." Needless to say, the secret ingredients were not revealed, but the detailed article stated that the principal ingredient, which "does the trick" in cleaning the metal, "is first put through a powerful mill and ground to powder, and then run through a trough into water tanks and allowed to settle. The water is run off and the finest powder it retained and dried, the remainder being ground down again" (Anon. 1901). Coconut shell can be ground to a fine powder this way and, although today grinding and refining is done with hammer mills, phosphor-bronze sieves on rotary shakers and cyclone separators, the coconut shell flour that is produced is still used to clean metal – but the turbine blades of high performance jet engines rather than soldiers' buttons. So one of the secret ingredients in "Yewsabit" could be coconut shell flour – using the piles of coconut shells left behind years earlier.

The ingredients were also claimed to be "local materials" which would confuse competing polish

makers but would be true if the coconut shells came from the neighboring mill site. What other material, local to the Kingston area, could be processed as described above? Corn flour would not require such fine grinding although it might, perhaps, have been another ingredient, cooked to give a paste-like consistency (as described in the newspaper article). The third and fourth ingredients could have been coconut and linseed oils from the oil mill because a surface film of oil will protect metal from corrosion. Finally, soap could be the fifth ingredient because the high lauric content of coconut oil makes it ideal for soap production. Was soap also a product of the Oil Mill? Perhaps it is no coincidence that from 1872 to 1936 the Kingston "Steam Laundry" was located (under various names) in Oil Mill Lane (now Villiers Street).

By 1910, Johnston's and Yewsabit had vanished from Kingston (Sampson 1985). But military "spit and polish" did not vanish when khaki replaced the bright red uniforms with shiny buttons that made the British troops in the Boer War too visible a target for the somberly attired Boer guerrillas. More prosaically, perhaps the mountains of unused coconut shell at Middle Mill had dwindled to nothing by 1910.

The census for 1871 shows that Middle Mill employed 34 men and 17 boys. What would be more likely than that the men should relax over a drink at the local public house? Before 1840 this was called "The Joiner's Arms" (1840 tithe record), but it had become the "The Cocoanut" by 1858 (LHR 2003). At the present time it is the only public house in Britain with this name (there are two called "Cocoanut Grove or Coconut Grove," three called "Palm Tree," and thirty-five called "Joiners Arms" [Conroy 2004]). The pub on Mill Street in Kingston lies between the Hogsmill river and the area known as Fairfield which, as its name implies, is a green space where, to this day, the people of Kingston are entertained by circuses and have fun in fairgrounds. When the Middle Mill boys played games on the Fairfield perhaps they threw sticks at coconuts. And when the fun-fair came to town perhaps the management of Middle Mill, the nearest industrial producer and employer, supplied coconuts at cost as a gesture of goodwill. Sometime, between the 1867 Pleasure Fair and the 1880 mill closure, the coconut shy as we know it today came into existence. The University of Kingston now stands on the banks of the Hogsmill river and only the public house commemorates the earlier tropical connections of the location. But the popularity of the coconut shy has spread throughout Britain and can still show a profit "One of our regular tenants, Albert, gets his sole



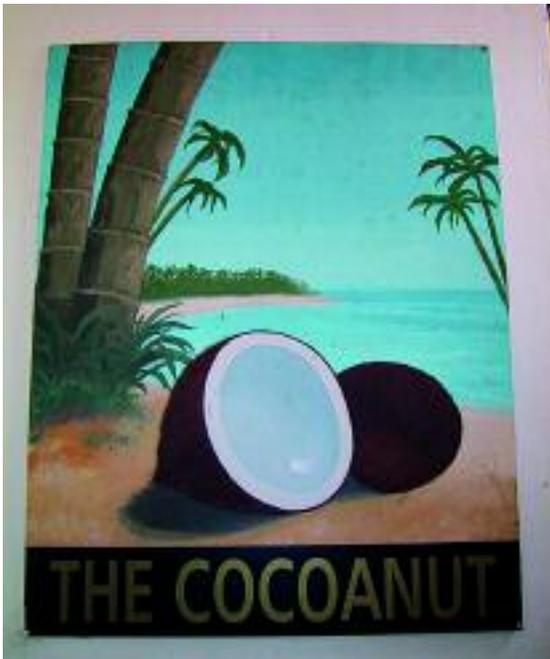
2. Yewsabit polish tin lid (reproduced from [www.tinshop.co.uk](http://www.tinshop.co.uk)).

living from a sheet [the banner displayed by the proprietor]. He dresses the part and calls them in. His mother ran the sheet, back in the 1930s and it has been earning a living since. It is not unusual for Albert to lose over 4 bags of nuts at a fair, and to give the ladies a fair chance he has a ladies line. The more nuts you lose the more money you take" (pers. comm. Malcolm Perrett; *All the Fun of the Fair* 2003).

Are there too many coincidences? A public house with an unusual name, once situated between a fairground and a matting factory? An oil mill and a neighboring coconut fiber works owned by one man? Two people called Wilson involved with coconut stearine candles and a third Wilson involved with coconut mats? The method of grinding a secret ingredient for a metal polish that could have removed the last tangible evidence of coconut (Perhaps, in the future, some archaeologist will find coconut shell fragments under the foundations of the University)? Or, if they are on target like wooden balls thrown at coconuts, perhaps we can say "You have hit the bull's-eye, rung the bell, and gathered in the cigar or cocoanut according to choice" (Wodehouse 1910).

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3. The Cocoanut public house sign. Photo: Tim Tempest, Griffin Brewery, Fuller, Smith & Turner P.L.C.

house; to Richard Holmes (particularly for finding many of the details and for making positive suggestions) and Annita Barbieri, volunteers, Jill Lamb, archivist, and Emma Rummings, local history officer, at the Local History Room of the North Kingston Centre, for locating specific items of information; to Vanessa Toulmin, University of Sheffield National Fairground Archive; to Tim Tempest of Fuller, Smith & Turner PLC, Griffin Brewery for Figure 3; and to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew for access to the Centre for Economic Botany library.

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