

The Ubiquitous Corkscrew

By Joan Brittain

Featuring the special sale at Christie's South Kensington, May 1999



Christies, South Kensington. French nineteenth century Celestin Durand 1899 Patent rack and pinion corkscrew, £10,350 (including premium).

The Corkscrew must be responsible for more exasperation and muttered expletives than any other of our domestic aids and despite years of progressive designs, extracting corks from bottles still poses problems. Since wine graduated from wooden barrels and earthenware jars into long necked bottles, a great variety of implements have been designed for pulling corks out swiftly and surely. Some have looked more suitable for launching missiles. Others were bewilderingly mysterious by their impressive array of appendages on the handle and shaft. And there were those 'built for long lasting' of heavy-gauge steel with springs on shanks, split barrels and barrels formed from a coiled spring which probably trapped as many fingers as corks they withdrew.

Christie's of South Kensington, London, had a special corkscrew sale at the end of May and there were many delightful examples up for auction, some of which reached

amazing prices. Top price in the sale was a rare French nineteenth century Celestin Durand 1899 Patent rack and pinion corkscrew No:132032 which was estimated to sell between £4,000-£4,500 and finally went for £10,350 including premium. Another surprise in the auction was an English nineteenth century Thomason Variant type double-action with a gilded snake raising handle, an oval top handle and a gilt badge marked 'Dowler Ne Plus Ultra' which also went well beyond its estimated £2,000-£3,000 and finally settled at £7,820 (incl). In 1802, the inventor of this corkscrew, Sir Edward Thomason, joined in the quest for an ideal implement to remove corks and his was the first to be patented with a brush on the handle which was used for dusting off the labels and tops of bottles. Prior to this, Thomason had set up his own business at the age of twenty-one making buttons and before long he expanded his trade to include the manufacture of medals, tokens and coins. In fourteen years he produced around 130,000 of his patented corkscrews which sold at one guinea each and in the course of ten years when the price went down to four shillings to suit the pockets of more people, a larger number continued to be sold annually.

One good thing about buying corkscrews is that very little needs to be checked. So long as the worm is not bent or broken at the tip, it will function. Mechanical screws are subject to wear, but provided there is

no significant damage this is acceptable. Bar corkscrews, where both speed and safety were top priorities and the bottle taken to the corkscrew rather than the other way round, were sturdy enough in design to evade damage. A fine example in Christie's sale, a cast iron Gilchrist made in 1897, marked 'Original Safety Reg No: 543083 sold, together with an 'Acme' bar type for £218. And another similar cast iron Gilchrist made in 1894, also 543083 fetched £138. More decorative in design was a fine ormolu figural corkscrew with a sliding frame with two caryatids above, harvesting grapes and two beneath, one holding the central barrel and the other pouring a glass of wine. This fetched £4,370 in the Auction. A touch of humour was an Italian novelty black painted aluminium Barmaid opener, which together with an Andy Capp and Flo table corkscrew, sold in a lot for £172.

In 1875 an inventor, Hiram T. Codd, from whose name came the expression 'cods-wallop' (meaning something weak as for example lemonade compared to wine), invented the Codd bottle. The stopper in this case was an internal glass marble which was forced by the gas pressure inside the bottle against a rubber ring in the neck. So seeing this as an additional aid on their combination tools, many manufacturers attached a gadget for pressing down the ball to release the gas. A conventional Codd opener before these aids came on the market was in the Christie's auction, marked on the handle 'Patent' and indistinctly No:7*01, and this also did well selling at £172 against its estimated £120-£150. And a 'corkscrew' which had practically everything anybody would require when out and about was an ivory mounted 3-section folding combination comprising a knife, fork and spoon, a frame saw, scissors, a nail file, two further knives, two pull-on hooks, seven screwdrivers and gimlets and a whistle which fetched £276 against its estimated £120-£180.

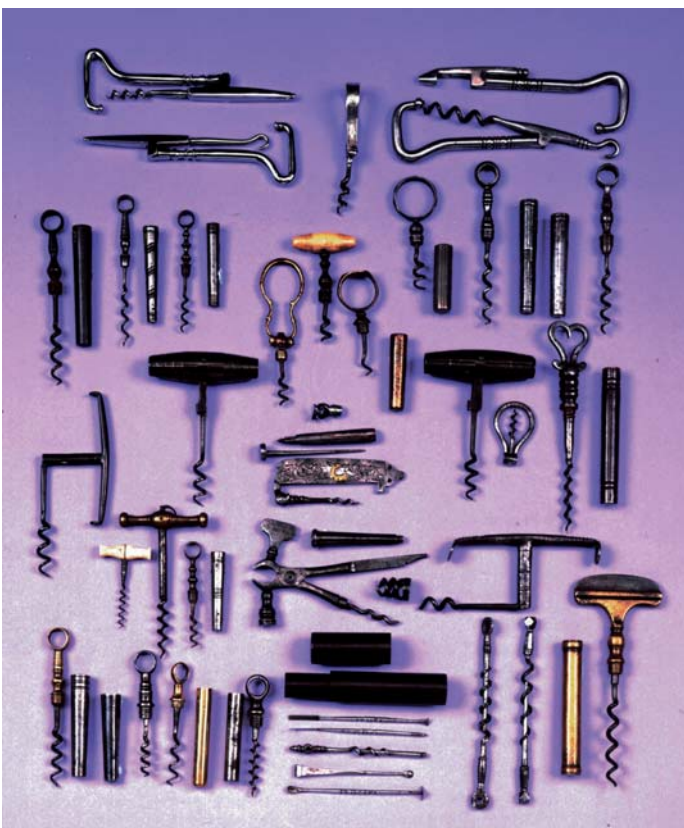
Early corkscrews, with ring or crossbar handles, were of a sturdy pattern which to a large extent has continued to the present day. Then as time passed came the variations in shape and design all produced in an attempt to open a bottle more efficiently than those currently on the market. And this is still happening today! The real question is, who invented the first corkscrew? It could well be that it was an English invention. The earliest known in this country, a 'Steel Worme used for drawing Corks out of Bottles', existed in 1681 although it appears such an instrument was in use for some time before that for extracting corks from bottles of cider. A hundred years on, it became a growing habit in England to mature wines in the bulbous, onion and mallet shaped bottles rather than in casks and the rapid growth in the corkscrew manufacturing trade in England escalated in the mid 1700s with a never-ending flow of ingenious patents mostly emanating from Birmingham. Collecting these ingenious pieces of machinery is a fascinating pursuit and undoubtedly there will be many more designs in the pipeline which will eventually become antiques of the future.



Christies, South Kensington. Nineteenth and early twentieth century German, French and English novelty, combination matchcase and pocket knife corkscrews, nickel plated, brass and steel.



Christies, South Kensington. Nineteenth and twentieth century decorative and caricature corkscrews. English, French and Danish, brass, silver and silver plated. Centre. The large ormolu figural corkscrew with two caryatids on the top holding central barrel and two beneath pouring wine which sold for £4,370.



Christies, South Kensington. Eighteenth and Nineteenth century French and English pocket folding, picnic, travelling and combination folding screw and boot jack corkscrews in steel, bronze, brass and silver. Bottom row centre: Five early nineteenth century steel instruments in rosewood tube comprising peg and worm with acorn finial, tweezers, nail file, ear scoop and scraper/ear scoop sold for £230.



Christies, South Kensington. Nineteenth century English Thomason corkscrews with bone handles and dusting brushes. Middle row centre. Corkscrew with gilded snake raising handle and oval top handle which sold for £7,820.