

Milk can collections and collectors.

Where are all the milk can (milk churn) collectors?

Where are all the milk can (milk churn) collectors? This is the question being asked by Ian Spellerberg in New Zealand. A retired professor of nature conservation, Ian is now conserving milk cans as well as researching their social history. A member of the Christchurch Antique Bottle and Collectors Club, Ian started asking his fellow collectors about the history of milk bottles and milk cans. It soon became evident that around the world there are many collectors of milk bottles as well as clubs and societies. However there seems to be no club or society for milk can collectors. Indeed, he has yet to discover any other collector of milk cans. There are many collectors of dairy memorabilia but where are the 'specialist' milk can collectors?

To learn more about milk cans, Ian communicated with retired milk farmers and milk men and women around the world. The most obvious questions were: Are they still being made? Are milk can designs very old? Are there many different designs? What were they made of? How were they made? What happened to them after they were no longer suitable for holding milk or cream? Having found very little written about milk cans, he decided to embark on writing a book.

This is the first book dedicated to the history, design and use of milk cans. It will be published in New Zealand towards the end of May 2018. Another reason for writing this illustrated book is because Ian Spellerberg believes that the humble milk can should be celebrated and by way of being on display in art and design galleries and museums. It is for that reason the title of the book is *'Milk Cans – A Celebration of Their History, Use and Design'*.

There is much nostalgia about milk cans (churns as they are known in the U.K.). They are popular garden 'sculptures'. Cleaning and painting old milk cans is a very popular hobby. There are many examples of milk can architecture. Thousands of milk cans must have rusted away in corners of farm yards or have been sent to metal recycling yards. However, milk cans are commonly recycled as letter boxes, bread bins, umbrella stands, containers for plants, and even garden rollers.

Ian Spellerberg's research has culminated in some intriguing information. Did you know that:

1. The size (volume) of milk cans ranged from a huge 25 gallons to just 1/8th of a pint.
2. Between 1859 and 1919 there were at least 543 patents taken out in the USA for milk cans, improvements to milk cans, and milk can handles.
3. The design for some milk cans dates back to over 1000 years. That same design is still used today.
4. Milk cans (stainless steel and plastic) are still made and used today.

5. Milk cans are used in countries such as New Zealand with a huge dairy herd and milk production. The cans are for the goat herd.
6. Information about the history and design of milk cans can be found in old paintings.
7. The design and shape of milk cans around the world is very diverse.
8. Milk cans have been made out of clay, porcelain, wood, bamboo, plastic and metal (iron, steel, tin, copper, brass).
9. The daily collection (or twice daily) collection of milk and return of empty cans was a highlight of each day. The milk and cream deliveries to local dairies was a main focal point for local communities.
10. The design of the 'typical' milk can has been adopted for many other household items and continues to do so. Biscuit barrels, plant pots, bird boxes, light shades, cocktail shakers and glue pots have been designed in the shape of milk cans.

With more than 230 images in his book, Ian finds it difficult to choose some of his favourites. The copper milk cans are particularly attractive. So too are the hand painted cans. Three of his favourite cans include a small copper and brass functional milk can, a counter pan that once stood in a pantry, and a recent copy of an a brass advertising can. The collection includes not only real milk cans (in varying conditions) but also miniature milk cans. Ian suggests that collecting miniature milk cans could make a very enjoyable hobby. They tend not to be expensive and they are not very rare.

Finally, of all farmyard objects, the humble milk can seems to be the one object that is most remembered and the one that is most photographed. Ian Spellerberg asks "why is it that milk cans are not collected and studied as widely as milk bottles?"

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Details about the publishing of his book will be available from Smiths Bookshop towards the end of May.

www.smithsbookshop.co.nz

Other books by Ian Spellerberg include:

Reading and Writing Accessories: a study of paper-knives, paper folders, letter openers and mythical page turners. 2015. Cadsonbury Publications, Christchurch.

Match Holders: first-hand accounts of tinderboxes, matches, spills, vest cases, match strikers, and permanent matches. 2016. Cadsonbury Publications, Christchurch.



Collection of milk cans.



Copper milk cans and hand decorated milk cans.



Three 'special' milk cans. A real brass and copper milk can (6 pints). A counter pan. A modern copy of a brass advertising can that would have been placed in a dairy shop window.



Three miniature milk 'cans'.