PILL BOXES

Bríd O'Reilly

PILL BOXES WERE magic! Pill boxes came in all shapes and sizes—circular, square, cylindrical, triangular and hexagonal. They were of varying heights, widths, colours and capacity. They contained all sorts of remedies for all ills—remember Carter's Little Liver Pills, Doan's Backache Pills, Cascara Pills—pills for this and pills for that, and they all came in cardboard boxes with brightly coloured labels which looked attractive and eye-catching and promised immediate relief from maladies which we never knew existed. These pill boxes really caught one's imagination and so the miscellaneous products within were tried and often found wanting.

If you really were in need of medication the doctor or pharmacist counted the prescribed pills from large containers into dull grey pill boxes and plonked a message on the lid regarding their usage.

Pill boxes played a very important role in our everyday lives, whether we were in full health or feeling poorly. Even when they were empty they were still extremely valuable They were never thrown away—they made excellent containers for all kinds of paraphernalia such as odd buttons, collar studs, safety pins, razor blades, segs for boots, marbles, Auntie Maggie's jewellery, hooks and eyes, press studs, thread, sewing needles, knicker elastic, nails, medals, tacks and numerous other knick-knacks—the list was endless.

Boys found pill boxes invaluable for holding snails, butterflies, spiders, rubber bands, twine, half-smoked Woodbines, worms for fish-bait, fishing hooks and other unrecognisable objects.

Money, too, could be hidden by children in pill boxes—farthings, half pennies, threepenny bits, tanners, and the odd half-crown given by inebriated uncles at Christmas time. All could be put by for the rainy day when one might decide to run away from home or embark on some exciting adventure.

Pill boxes were never known to descend to the level of common litter. You would certainly not find them emptied out on the roadside in heaps or dangling drunkenly from a blackthorn hedge. You would never trip over one on a sandy beach or slip on a wet one on a street corner. Drains were uncluttered with pill boxes or innocent children would never find discarded half-empty pill boxes in their play areas. Never was it known that cats, rats or dogs came sniffing around pill boxes under cover of darkness. No! Pill boxes could not be insultingly classed as rubbish, to be piled into litter bags with chicken bones and broken mugs and taken away to be dumped.

Film Stars, Models, Royalty and even commoners wore Pill Boxes on their heads. These came in brightly coloured satin or velvet, beribboned, plumed and veiled.

While pill box hats looked smart sitting on curls and ringlets, it was quite a performance to keep them immobile on one's head and hatpins played an important role during the pill-box hat reign.

People woke up one morning in the late 1930's to see strange objects lurking behind ditches, walls and hedges. Old men stood scratching their heads in wonder as they beheld pill boxes built of concrete strategically placed with slits at eye level - these had been erected during the hours of darkness and were large enough to accommodate two or three men—full of pills, perhaps, Happily, these pill boxes were never used during World War 2, to my knowledge, and may still be seen around the countryside.

One disadvantage associated with pill boxes was that they had to be carried by men in their breast-pockets, back-pockets or waistcoat pockets. That box-like bulge gave rise to speculation as to the state of the 'poor man's health'. Women, however, could hide the pill box deep within the folds of their red flannel petticoats and the question of their state of health might never arise.

Pill boxes went back time and time again to the dispensary to be refilled with 'blue', 'red', 'white' or 'pink' tablets. It took all the ingenuity of the doctor or pharmacist to locate the right colour of pill or to try to decipher the well-thumbed writing on the label. However, after a few probing questions, all would be well.

The invention of pill boxes proved a great boon in the pre-plastic era. With the advent of plastic and glass containers, the colourful little cardboard boxes almost disappeared from the shelves—new receptacles had to be found for the miscellaneous items of treasure which had originally been stored in the humble pill box. That reliable and useful cardboard box became redundant as have many of the relics of a bygone age.