Canadian Audiologist
The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

A Brief History of the Acoustic Ear Trumpet and Some Collection Favourites

Published January 16th, 2024

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If you think you know a thing or two about ear trumpets, I'd bet Michael Briggs knows more! In this fascinating article, he tells the history of the ear trumpet, as well as sharing some wonderful pictures from his Guiness World Record collection.

In the year 2001, my impaired hearing was following the trend set by my mother and two grandparents, and had become an issue. For a significant birthday, my family clubbed together to purchase a nearly 200-year-old solid silver ear trumpet in the forlorn hope it would be a life asset - it wasn't. The trumpet proved to be virtually useless. Simple physics suggested that the wide end of the trumpet needed to be much larger than the human ear to collect more sound.

I researched antique ear trumpets and soon discovered that, in addition to a simple tapered horn, one could buy antiques in the form of a double parabola London Dome or Banjo, or even a metre-long conversation tube. Samples were quickly acquired, and the world-class Packington Collection was started. My collection is predicated on the realisation that a huge variety existed in the historical implementation of ear trumpets. The illustrations in this article are taken from items in the collection.

The earliest-found reference to an ear trumpet is the example found in King Tutankhamun's tomb – 1332 BC. This is a solid silver small horn, visually very similar to the auricle shape (see picture 1815). Although not strictly an ear trumpet, pipes and tubes were also used in buildings to transmit sound. A 400 BC illustration shows a pipe for conveying the sound laid between the dungeons at the foot of the mountain made by Dionysos in Sicily and the guard room at the summit. Similar building constructions were used through to Victorian times, mainly to eavesdrop. In Victorian mansions long tubes were used to communicate between the gentry in living rooms and the servants.

Even the Romans tackled the issue. Contemporary court descriptions tell of Emperor Hadrian b. 76 AD cupping his hand behind his ear in order to hear better. He is also recorded as wearing small parchment cups behind his ears and having his throne in a concave alcove to reflect sound. It is much later that we find small instruments reminiscent of Victorian ear trumpets.

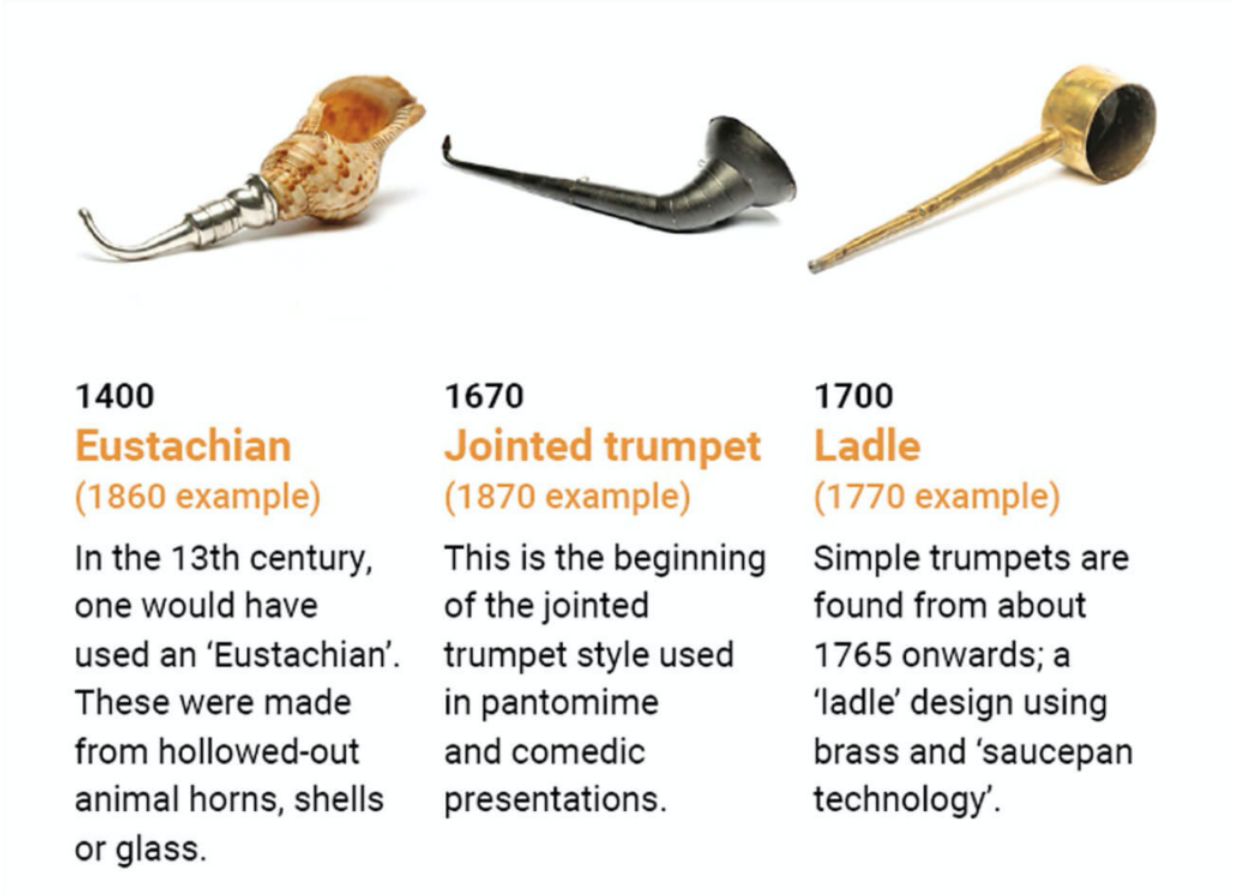
In a 1558 book called *Natural Magick*, an Italian doctor, scientist and cryptographer, Giovanni Battista Porta, described wooden ear-shaped cups to fit over the ears. Over the next 250 years, a

variety of designs and iterations of the ear trumpet are documented in history, including an engraving in the Wellcome Foundation collection dated 1780, which shows a chair designed for use by the deaf incorporating a hearing device. By the 1800s, quite a wide variety of ear trumpets were being mass produced for sale. These came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Most of the smaller items were fairly useless, but served to indicate one needed to shout at the holder.

Mass production of the ear trumpet surged then dwindled in the early 20th century, but a few makes held on until the 50s. In 1948, the UK National Health Service (Medresco) introduces a range of at least six different ear trumpets designs, most of which are datemarked. Eschmann tapered conversation tubes were made in the UK right up to 1976, although the design was virtually unchanged from the early commercially produced examples in the 1880s.

The NHS took delivery of 20,000 units in 1976. I was in my mid-thirties in ‘76 and never saw a person in public with a trumpet, but plenty of pink plastic thermionic valve-based units.

The rows of illustrations show collection items in date order; these emphasise the variety found. The last row shows six NHS ear trumpets.



1775

Townsend

(1810 example)

Personal handmade trumpets are recorded. Originators like Townsend, Daubeney and for Joshua Reynolds.

1815

Auricle

(1880 example)

DJ Larrey developed a 'listening helmet' for Napoleon's armies based on a pair of auricles.

1816

Stethoscope

(1865 example)

The earliest stethoscope is attributed to René Théophile Hyacinthe Laënnec.

1817

(1820 example)

John H Curtis proposed five 'acoustical instruments', including a seven-piece telescopic, of which this is a silver example.

1819

(1885 example)

The 'conversation tube' was first patented by Johann A Duncker (also used by chaperoned courting couples for privacy).

1829

Drapier

(1870 example)

Drapier starts manufacture and continued right through until 1940.

1851
(1870 example)

Jean Pierre Bonnafont decided the length of ear trumpets was unnecessary - so he folded it.

1855
Rein

Rein presented 18 different ear trumpets at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Beautifully engraved London Dome.

1860
Walking stick

Trumpets were being sold on the top of walking sticks - French maker unknown.

1879
Dentaphone
(1895 example)

Thomas Graydon patents the Dentaphone - a bone conduction device.

1881
(1890 example)

Franck Valery introduces combination trumpet and spectacles at the International Exhibition.

1883
(1885 example)

Based on Helmholz' theory, Adam Politzer invented the 2 parabola trumpet known as the 'banjo'.

1895

Adolphe Pinard a French obstetrician invented his still popular monaural stethoscope - the midwife's friend.

1905

The Globe Ear-Phone Company opens in Boston and introduces its 'ear horn'.

1924
(1930 example)

VibraPhone introduced 'ear tubes'. Charles Fensky 'improves' them and offers internal vibrating reeds four years later.

NHS-issued trumpets

1949
Mears

Sonor ear trumpet by Mears, this design goes back to 1900.

1950
R J Dowling

London Dome ear trumpet, one of the more effective designs.

1951
FWA

Head-banded auricles — one of several NHS models.

1952
Mears
Tapered conversation tube. Rein made an almost identical item from about 1870.

1959
Eschmann
Miss Greene ear trumpet, available from two makers.

1976
Eschmann
Telescopic 2pc ear trumpet, available from three makers.

Some favourites in my World Record collection:

The three rows of pictures show my favourites in size order, further emphasising the variety found. No two images are really alike.(The captions indicate date, length in mm, location found, reason for being a favourite, sorted by length ascending.)

1900
120mm
Leeds, UK
Beehive ear trumpet, based on the London Dome, fairly unusual, also in metal.

1806
134mm
Artarmon, Australia
Russian niello on solid silver by Gavril Ustinov, Moscow. This is just a beautiful piece of craftsmanship.

1891
139mm
Barnes, UK
Auricle by Dr F M Blodgett, in its original tin. Only three are known to survive.

1830

147mm

Derby, UK

Very unusual monaural stethoscope, probably fruit wood with an ivory earpiece. Possibly unique.

1900

165mm

Brooklyn, NY, USA

One-piece ear trumpet, maybe made by a craftsman who built musical instruments.

1803

166mm

York, UK

Solid silver by Hampson, Prince & Cattles. This was the first acquisition bought by the author's family - very poor performance.

1882

185mm

Charleston, IL, USA

Leather-covered London dome by Pilling with a gutta-percha earpiece.

1883

194mm

Montreal, Canada

Solid silver embossed trumpet featuring African wildlife. Very rare.

1926

264mm

Eastbourne, UK

Rare green faux jade telescopic 2pc ear trumpet. Never seen another item in this material.

1820

267mm

Dallas, TX, USA

Seven-horn enamelled tin (to imitate tortoiseshell) trumpet. Experience suggests that this is unique. The horns all have the same effective tube length.

1890

280mm

St Louis, MI, USA

Faux-tortoiseshell and vulcanite 'banjo' style trumpet. Very rare.

1890

290mm

Brooklyn, NY, USA

Embossed copper trumpet which was probably silver plated. Very rare, possibly unique.

1886

330mm

Charleston, IL, USA

Franck-Valery tragus ear trumpet hidden with a fan. So frail that few survive.

1880

367mm

Claremont, NH, USA

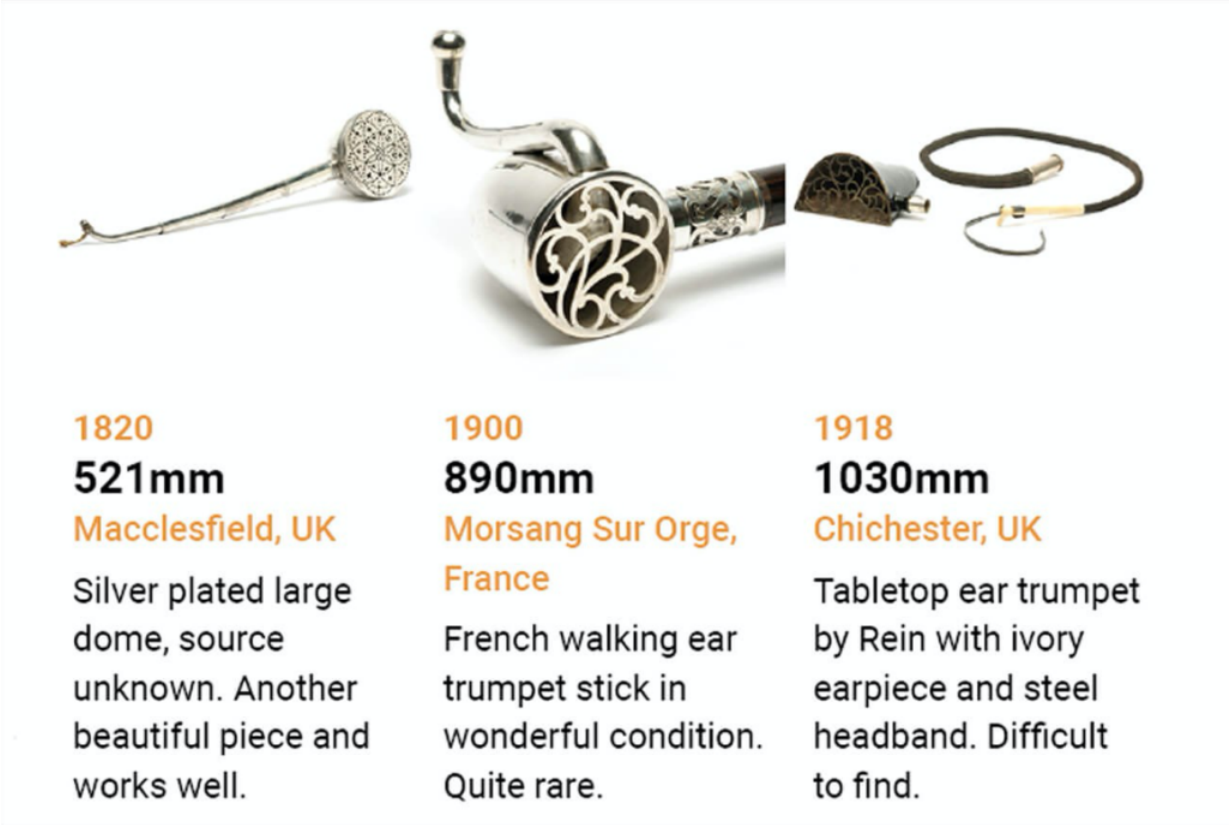
Typical tinsmith work using sectional construction to reduce the overall length.

2000

370mm

Mulino, OR, USA

Accurate replica one-piece ear trumpet from a genuine Civil War museum. Piece from 1862.



Note: Object dating is a nightmare, but many of these objects are shown in one or more of the 70 maker's catalogues kept in the collection, which has been very helpful.

All of these images are of items in the Packington Collection, 563 all-different ear trumpets on permanent public display in one room at the Oswestry Town Museum, Oswestry SY11 1PZ, UK. https://oswestrytownmuseum.co.uk