

LIQUFRUTA

Les Roberts, University of Liverpool

This rather unexceptional looking object was once a medicine bottle. It has a story of sorts that I've attempted to weave around it and which takes in a more expansive history and geography than that which defines my own relationship with it in terms of its materiality. My rationale for choosing this particular object is partly instrumental insofar as it has offered me an opportunity to examine a bit more closely my rather tenuous attachment to the bottle as a physical object; attachment in the sense of some sort of an aesthetic or affective bond; but also perhaps as a material expression of some pathological hoard mentality that dispossesses me of the ability to just throw it in the bin for recycling.

It has been sitting on our kitchen shelf at home ever since I retrieved it from a state of oblivion, half buried in the sand flats off Hilbre Island in the Dee Estuary. Hilbre Island is in fact three small islands (the other two are called Middle Eye and Little Eye) that are situated at the mouth of the River Dee on the border between England and Wales – between the Wirral peninsula and the Flintshire coastline. The islands can only be accessed from the mainland at low tide.

In my capacity as a gleaner it was mainly photographic images of the islands that I had been interested in collecting. Quite why this caught my eye is not altogether clear. Perhaps it was its shape, which conveyed a certain antique and artifactual provenance. It seemed somehow 'old', inviting the idea that it had been marooned in the sand for many years or decades. Perhaps also it was the rounded briny encrustations on parts of the bottle, which give it a hybrid quality as if it had begun to adapt to its new underwater habitat and thus was in the slow process of transformation and *becoming*. Or perhaps it was the tiny scratches and abrasions across the surface of the glass which each bore the mark of a past encounter or a specific moment on its otherwise random journey. On reflection, it was probably these that had left the most prominent impression as many of the photographs I had been taking on the island were close ups of detail; micro-cartographies of



texture, patterns, accretions and pockmarks on stone, metal, glass – whatever surface I happened to chance upon. In other words it was the aesthetic qualities of the bottle that had piqued my interest. And while these seemed to be demanding some sort of further response and engagement on my part I was not entirely sure what, if anything this would be. So the object has spent much of its time since languishing on my kitchen shelf.

It wasn't until I had returned home and washed the bottle that I noticed the lettering up each side: LIQUFRUTA. I remember making some brief enquiries as to what this might mean but didn't pursue things any further. It remained a project quite literally on the shelf.

This brings me to the next layering of narrative that I have wrapped around the materiality of the object. This has followed the traces of its social life as a commodity, with fixed origins, an institutional and discursive locus of inception, and an entrepreneurial history rooted in practices of health and well-being.

Liqufruta was a cough syrup patented in 1902 by one William Homeyard. According to the British Medical Journal the following year, the label on the bottle, which retailed at 2s. 9d, included the words:

Liqufruta Medica the Only Safe Cure for Pulmonary Consumption, Chronic Asthma, Bronchitis, Catarrh. Certain of the germicidal constituents contained in this remedy are otherwise unobtainable throughout the world. Guaranteed free of poison, laudanum, copper solution, cocaine, morphia, opium... narcotics, or preservatives. Liqufruta Medica heals the chest, lungs, and throat, arrests the inflammation, loosens the phlegm, and effectually destroys the bacilli of consumption, etc., which no other medicine can reach.

Described as “a dark brown, rather thick liquid, smelling like a mixture of garlic or onion and peppermint”, or, alternatively, tasting like “creosote and liquorice”, Liqufruta was manufactured in Camberwell in London for more than thirty years.

Formerly a newspaper manager, William Homeyard applied his publishing skills to the advertising of Liqufruta, issuing regular pamphlets that described the medicinal and restorative attributes of the product. One of the leaflets described these communications as ‘spreading the Liqufruta Gospel’. If

this ascribed a certain theological or evangelical zeal to the Liqufruta cause, even more notable were Homeyard's efforts to promote the purported 'natural' qualities of his product. At the header and footer of the pamphlet pages were quotes such as: "Nature is but another name for health" – Thoreau'; "The never idle workshop of Nature" – Matthew Arnold'; "Accuse not nature; she hath done her part; do thou but thine" – Milton'; or "Medicines are created out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them', which is from the Old Testament.

In 1907 Homeyard married Maria Laetitia Kempe Roberts. They both had roots in the West Country and in 1921 the couple bought a second home, Ness Cottage, in the small village of Shaldon in south Devon. The cottage has views out across the Teign estuary and Lyme Bay. They divided their time between Shaldon and their main home in Camberwell near the Liqufruta Laboratories.

In 1927 Homeyard died, leaving all of the substantial fortune he had amassed to his wife Maria. He was buried at St. Nicholas churchyard in Ringmore, near Shaldon. Maria's request to have the word LIQUFRUTA engraved on her husband's headstone was refused by the vicar who deemed it inappropriate advertising. However, her follow up request for a Latin inscription *was* approved, and the word 'ATURFUQIL' is visible today on Homeyard's headstone. ATURFUQIL is not Latin but LIQUFRUTA spelt backwards. Whether or not the vicar cottoned on to the deception is not known.

Maria quickly put her inheritance to good use, becoming a successful property developer and buying up land at several sites in Shaldon. This included the purchase of land adjacent to Ness Cottage which would eventually become Homeyard Botanical Gardens. The Pleasure Gardens, as they were known at the time, were designed by Thomas Rider of Southwark in London. They consist of an Italianate garden area, a 'witch's cave' or grotto, a pond and rill system, and a summer house built in the style of a castle. The Gardens were tended by teams of up to 12 gardeners. Work on the Gardens continued until the outbreak of war in 1939.

Maria Homeyard died in 1944. A year after her death her estate was offered for sale. Teignmouth Town Council purchased the Gardens in 1950 and the Homeyards Botanical Gardens were officially opened to the public on 7th April 1955.

In London, the Liqufruta brand and factory had been bought by a company named Sanitas in 1931. Today Liqufruta is owned by the pharmaceutical company Alston Garrard & Co. based in Modbury in Devon. The manufacturing company is Ransom Naturals. Recalling Homeyard's earlier entrepreneurial paeon to nature, the company's website states that:

With over one hundred and sixty years of experience we've stayed true to a love of nature and our roots in botanicals but adapting to harness the latest in scientific techniques and to meet the changing needs of markets and customers.

That is as far as the historical back story of the object is able to go. My own pathway back into this narrative joins up with another Ness Botanical Gardens, this one located not in Devon but overlooking the Dee Estuary a few miles south of Hilbre Island, the place where the story began. Ness Botanical Gardens are owned by my employer, the University of Liverpool. The marshland around Ness, stretching out across the estuary to shifting sand and mud flats, the river and the Welsh coastline lying beyond, have become a space into which a number of tributaries – corporeal, intellectual, psychological, aesthetic – have found a productive outlet. Recent work on themes of liminality – explored in part in the *Liminal Landscapes* volume that Hazel [Andrews] and I edited – as well as ongoing research into the historical geography of the Dee and, in a broader context, the relationship between liminality, well-being and creativity has drawn from the same wellspring and landscape that yielded this otherwise unremarkable bottle.

So in the end perhaps the reason it has lingered on the kitchen shelf is that, on the one hand, it materialises some of the same restorative powers that William Homeyard tried to bottle back in 1902: the cultural distillation of nature; the consumption of an idea and affect of well-being. On the other hand, perhaps it also functions as an object onto which I have been able to project anxieties bound up with the workaday demands of trudging a sustainable and above all gratifying pathway academically. A task made all the more demanding by the facile expectation that the fruit of our labours can somehow be bottled, industrialised and neatly labelled with the words 'impact'.

Les Roberts, March 2014

www.liminoids.com