

Toby, Or Not Toby



Sometimes, just by looking around the house, you can find little snippets of history just sitting there... doubling as decorative items. My parents, for whatever reason, liked collecting Toby jugs or character jugs which were vessels shaped to look like recognizable figures, either fictional or real. The one my mother passed onto me, pictured above, was made by Royal Doulton and depicts John Barleycorn, the personification of malt liquor. He also kind of looks like my dad.

Toby jugs have been around since the 18th century and there is some disputation regarding how they got their name. Some say they were named after Sir Toby Belch, the Shakespearean character from Twelfth Night. Others believe it to be a derivative of the French word "tope" which means to drink hard. But most seem to think that it was named after a notorious 18th century Yorkshire drinker, Henry Elwes, who was known as "Toby Fillpot" (or Philpot) and was inspired by an old English drinking song, "The Brown Jug."

While many refer to any figural vessel as a "Toby jug," purists define them as depicting full-figured personages usually seated, while a jug fashioned as the head or head and shoulders of a person is simply referred to as a character

jug. There's also a difference between a Toby jug and a Toby mug. Jugs are used for pouring and will have spouts while mugs are used for drinking and are spoutless.

In the early 20th century, at the height of its popularity, around two hundred companies were producing figural mugs and jugs but as interest has waned over the years, so have the number of producers. Only three companies still manufacture them. A vast collection of Toby and character jugs and mugs are on display in Evanston Illinois at the American Toby Jug Museum (<https://www.tobyjugmuseum.com/>)

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