Umbrellas

Ha, ha, ha! How they laughed that day in the 1790s when a man first walked the streets of London holding an umbrella.

Some people got angry and began shouting that to carry such a contraption was ungodly because it "defied the heavenly purpose of rain" (which is to get uswet).

Drivers of Hackney carriages soon realised umbrellas posed a threat to their trade, and insulted chaps who carried them by yelling: "What's wrong — are you a Frenchman?" It was a grievous insult (and still is today), but the umbrella was not
to be denied.

Eton schoolboys took to carrying them, much to the annoyance of their headmaster, John Keats. "An effeminate innovation," he thundered. "We are degenerating into a girl's school."

Early umbrellas were not impenetrable to rain. Their coverings of cotton, or even silk, were coated with oil, varnish or melted wax, which soon cracked. They featured all kinds of gimmicks. Some had windows, or whistled when open. There was an umbrella with a gutter, which drained rain down a tube. A variation on this caught rain in a flask for use as drinking water.

It was not until about 1800 that umbrellas and parasols achieved separate identities in Britain. Since ancient times there have been umbrellas to keep off the sun, but the word umbrella had nothing to do with rain. It is derived from Latin "umbra", meaning shade.

Until the early 1850s umbrellas had heavy whalebone frames which tended to crack. But then Samuel Fox came on the scene, and from his factory in Stockbridge, Sheffield, he revolutionised the umbrella world. In 1852, he patented a lightweight metal frame which was to make him a fortune and set the standard for umbrellas we know today.

The first umbrellas came to Britain from France but by the time of the battle of Waterloo in 1815 it was the French who were laughing at the British for using them. Napoleon's General Lejeune was highly amused that English officers rode across the field of battle holding aloft umbrellas and parasols. It might have looked ridiculous, but the British won!

That was not the only instance of umbrellas being used by the British army. The British Major Digby Tatham-Warter, veteran of WWI, and a commander of a parachute brigade during WWII, always carried an umbrella into battle. This not only provided some British humour in otherwise very serious and frightening circumstances, but was even used by the brave major to fight the Germans. Once he disabled a German tank by pushing the umbrella through the observation slit and wounding the driver in the eye.

Some collectors believe that now is a perfect time to start collecting antique umbrellas and parasols, as they are reckoned to be underpriced, a situation which could easily change if more people got the idea of collecting them. Parasol styles seemed to change every few months in the 19th century, so there are plenty to choose from. Beautiful parasols made in Victorian times can be bought for as little as 30 to 100 pounds, but even a rare Georgian umbrella with carved ivory grip might be unlikely to exceed 500 pounds at an auction.

Drivers of Hackney carriages insulted people who were using umbrellas because...

1. ...they wanted to sell umbrellas themselves.
2. ...they were trying to save their business.
3. ...the owners of umbrellas were French.
4. ...they didn't like what umbrellas looked like.