

THE GREAT DECEPTION - LACE MAKERS LAMPS

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Introduction

In this age of electric light and such light sources as quartz halogen, we tend to forget that it is an invention of comparatively modern times. We take good light sources for granted but our historical forbearers of lace making had no such luxury.

Many of us live in countries where we spend a great deal of time keeping the sunlight out of our homes and we enjoy high blue cloudless skies for much of every year, but again our historical cousins lived in "gloomy" Europe, with its dark winter days, which were frequently cloudy and sunless. Windows too were not so large as today, they needed them small to keep the houses warm (not to mention early taxation systems based on the number of windows in a house.)

Can you imagine making lace in a poor light?



Candles

(This section has been gleaned from Chapter One of The Candle makers Companion, by Betty Openheimer. A Storey Publishing Book Vermont 1957. ISBN 0-88266-994-x)

In history, we humans have been extending our daylight hours by many means for thousands of years. The earliest lamps were hollowed out stones filled with animal fat and a wick of some kind absorbing the fat and acting as a light source. Torches of pitch, flax soaked with resins or natural oils are another source of light. However, until the development of twisted fibres that were dipped in combustible substances that remained solid at room temperature, we were without the candle.



I have not been able to ascertain a date for the introduction of "candles" into the world, but their history includes candles made from vegetable oils, fish oil, animal tissue and insect secretions (beeswax). Even whole animals/birds, such as the Stormy Petrol were burned as a "candle".

In our more recent history, candles were made of tallow or beeswax. Tallow candles (i.e. animal fat) were difficult to make, smelly and smoky. Beeswax on the other hand burned cleaner and had a lovely odour, but they were very expensive. Only churches and the wealthy could afford beeswax candles.

The seventeenth century saw the control of candle making by Governments (England in particular) and also the taxing of these objects. To combat this imposition they developed rush lights by dipping reeds in suet, which were a cheaper and untaxed form of lighting. Still the poor people bought the more expensive candles because, as they were poor, they had less meat and therefore less suet to make the rush lights!



*A rush holder. *

The rushes were clipped in the vertical holder and rested on the plate that comes out of the upright on an arm.

Modern candles were a product of the nineteenth century. They learned how to refine tallow with alkalis and sulphuric acid to produce stearin, and later the introduction of paraffin products, allowed candles to be made of a harder and longer burning substance. This together with an improved method of fibre braiding for the wicks allowed for the mass production of an efficient, somewhat odourless and non-smoky candle.

Just for interest, the "match" was not invented until 1827 but part of the lace makers lighting kit was a tinderbox.

Let there be Light.

Light was clearly a problem for our lace makers. It is obvious from the many photographs and pictures, that lace makers moved outdoors as often as the weather and the temperature allowed, and who could blame them?

In different parts of England, as winter began, the lace makers were allowed to make their lace by candlelight. St Catherine's day (Catters, Nov 25th) or St Andrews day (Tanders Nov 30th) were the usual dates for commencing the candle season and dates around Candlemas day (Feb 2) or later in some places (Feb 14th) marked the cessation of the use of candles. (Dates seemed to differ in different parts of England. Perhaps due to different latitudes?)

Most of you will know of the custom of those at Wendover where the children in the lace schools danced in a ring around the great lace maker's candlestick. (See Wright p196) and in other places the custom of "jumping over the candlestick" was a good sport for the lace school children. Hence, the origin of the nursery rhyme;

Jack be nimble

Jack be quick

Jack jump over the candlestick.



An approximate reconstruction of the "Great Candle stick" in Wendover.

Who gets the Light?



Whiting p (253) has a good description of the "division" of light amongst the lace makers. The three legged stool (candle-block, candle-stool or pole-board are alternative names) upon which the candle and the water filled "magnifying" flasks are fitted, is placed in the middle of the room. The lace workers then arrange themselves around the light in an orderly manner that allows each person to have at least some of the light. The best lace makers use the highest stools and are nearest the light source. They have what is known as the "first-light" then the graded workers arrange themselves according to ability to have the "second-light" and the "third light". Whiting tells us that in this way 18 lace makers can be accommodated around the candle-stool.

From my own experiments with this form of lighting, I find it hard to understand how any maker, who was in the third light, or even the second light come to that, could make lace from that single source of illumination!



This experiment comprises a Candle light source, a magnifying bowl and a lace pillow. The bowl has no handle, quite a narrow base footprint and very small opening at the top.

In my experience the candle flame has to get quite close to the bowl to be able to focus on the pillow; therefore it too needs a small base footprint.

The Various Candle "Sticks" and Magnifiers.

It would seem appropriate to start with the type of candle stool that most "English" lace makers and followers of that tradition are familiar with. It has already been mentioned above, that of the candle-stool, candle-block or pole board



It is best described as a chunky three legged stool around the perimeter of which are a number of holes or sockets into which are placed holders for water filled flasks. They appear to be short necked (or cut necked) "chemistry-lab" type flasks or round bodied bottles with their necks cut short. The holders are hollowed wood and the sealed ends of the flasks are concealed in the hollow. There are usually four such flasks around the perimeter. In the centre of the seat of the stool is a hole, often right through the seat, in which there is a candlestick to hold the candle. This stick is adjustable through the hole in the seat to ensure that the candle can remain at the optimum height as it burns down.

There a number of accessories that are associated with the candle-stool, these are, rush bags or straw hutches and flask cushions, rush mats or nests. The former are bags in which the flasks are kept safe when not in use during the lighter times of the year and the latter are used to line the sockets upon which the flasks are rested. This helps to stop them jarring against the sockets.



A magnifying flask and a rush bag in which it is kept.

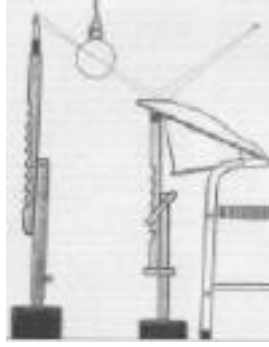
Whiting (p 252) shows a short-legged stool with a similar set up but the hole board and the sockets are threaded for easy adjustment. In addition, it appears to have an oil reservoir and wick as its light source. This comes from Switzerland and looks as if it would stand on a table as opposed to the floor.



On page 254, Whiting also shows Calvados lace maker using a stand upon which is a "wine" (?) bottle and behind it a separate candle stick.



I have a copy of a Czech postcard that shows a traditional low candlestick behind a flask that sits directly upon the table (Courtesy, Avril Bayne)



A Danish lace school set up.

Avril Bayne has also sent me a variety of material from Denmark showing a completely different set up from the English magnified candle light devices, though they both include the candle and the flask. In this case, the magnifying flask is hung from the ceiling by its neck and the candlestick is a taller adjustable two piece candlestick that uses a large block of wood for its base. When more than one lace maker needed light, four glass globes were suspended from a cross shaped piece of wood with the tall adjustable candle stick in the centre, much like the arrangement for the candle-stool.



Whiting (p 255) also describes a candle block from "Colonial New Hampshire". She describes a heavy, rough hewn block of wood for the base (similar to the Danish candle-stick base) and from it a rough square stick rises to the height of about a seated person. Upon it is tacked a "little, fluted, tin, maple sugar cake mold about 2 inches in diameter." Around this and upon it are hung half a dozen small, crudely wrought, iron candle sticks. (Can anyone send me a picture of this set up please?)



On the same page, Whiting also describes a small candle stool, similar to the Swiss model illustrated on p 252, but the poles would appear to have been much longer than those in the picture. This type of candle-stool was popular in New England.

With regard to the "modern" design of lace makers lamps. This is where an adjustable candlestick (adjustable in height and in distance from the globe) is integral to the globe stand. This design first appeared in The Wood turner in Vol 3. August 1984 and more than a few wood-turners (me included) have copied this design with some variations in shapes. I have never been able to trace an original antique lamp of this nature. I have little doubt that such a lamp exists, as it is so practical and a logical extension to the candle and globe arrangement. I now have in my possession a picture of a continental design of lace maker's lamp that includes the integral candlestick. Its design is very close to that of the lamp above which has its origins in the Woodworker.

Yallop p175 managed to achieve a light value of 50 lux in his experiments. He also tells us that there is evidence to say that when paraffin lamps came in, the lace makers slowly adopted them.

Discussion

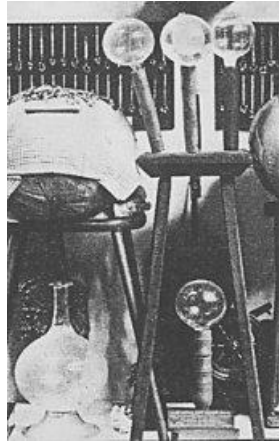
Certainly we (lace makers) know this arrangement as a lace maker's lamp, but it obvious that this arrangement was but a device for magnifying the light of a candle that was used by many artisans to illuminate their work and indeed by the gentry for writing at their desk. Correspondence in Arachne has told stories of these devices appearing in many films, often badly or wrongly set up. The Danish articles that I have places the name of these devices as "cobblers" lamps.

There has also been much discussion on the custom of using "snow water". Basically snow-water is very pure and close to the level of purity associated with distilled water. It would therefore be better than well water because it would be very clear, lacking sediment and less prone to depositing scale on the inside of the glass.

The issue of "blue" globes has also been canvassed and experimented with by a few correspondents. Jeffrey Hopewell illustrates an oil lamp and a flask (p 31) and comments that a few drops of sulphuric acid were added to give the water a bluish tinge to soften the light. There is little doubt that a bluish tinge to the water would give a more natural light and take away much of the "yellow" of a candle flame. Together with my friend we were able to use this and experiment with these lighting methods. (See accompanying illustrations) Please ensure that you follow strict safety precautions should you decide to experiment with this chemical. One other thing I should mention is that the larger the flask the better the light output.

Bullock (p78) tells us that the glass bowl stands were manufactured between the 1780s and the 1850s.

Groves (P 128) illustrates a variety of glass bowls.



The great deception.

For some years now I have been challenging the term that antique dealers and indeed many lace makers use to describe a rather beautiful glass lamp. They call it a "lace maker's lamp". To be blunt, these lamps are not lace maker's lamps but rather a generic name attributed to this style of lamp by less knowledgeable antique dealers. In the same breath I have to admit that this name is so entrenched in antique dealer's nomenclature that there is little hope of it ever being changed. But I repeat, it is a misnomer.



A typical Lace Makers Lamp

It can be conjectured that the globe like bowl at the top of these lamps look as though they are magnifying globes that could be filled with water and placed in front of a candle. Possibly they could but their shape and lack of diameter would prove them to be less than effective. They are in fact a very pretty oil lamp. What is missing from many of them is a tin lid to the bowl at the top which contains an aperture for the wick and a hole to allow the air in to replace the oil as it is used by the wick. It is certainly possible that lace makers could have used this type of oil lamp as a light source behind their magnifying flask. I am sure that they used a variety of light sources as they became available. But this possibility does not justify their generic description of a lace maker's lamp. Sadly I have

lost an entry from an encyclopaedia of lighting which said in effect that this was indeed a misnomer for the lamp, but that we would never change it. What you do need to know is that if you want to own a genuine lace makers lamp do not purchase one of these very attractive lamps. I am sure that this opinion will be very disappointing to many of you who own such a lamp and I will leave my opinion open to challenge by any of you readers. I do hope though that the illustrations accompanying this article will convince you of my position. You will also need to look at the illustrations I have quoted in the text, including an illustration by Huetson (p 86) for whom I have the highest opinion, whose illustration continues the myth.

Here are the more "complete" Lace Makers Lamps. As they were in their original condition; plainly they are oil lamps and are light sources not magnifiers



Conclusion.

The magnifying globes are very effective. Like a few Arachne correspondents, I have used them during power failures very effectively. The mind boggles as to how 18 lace makers could get light enough from a candle-stool to make their lace! None-the-less that is what is reported. Having lived in England for many years prior to coming to Australia, the historic candle lighting season of November to February seems to me to be very short. I suspect that candles were very expensive and had to be used sparingly.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this article and my thanks to Arachne for the discussion that was held on this topic. As always, I want to learn more about this subject and if you have anything that you can offer please write to me. I particularly would like photographs. So if you personally possess a lamp that is antique and would photograph it for me I would be most excited and grateful.



I might add a comment about these Lace Makers Lamps. They are very beautiful, graceful lines and a lovely item to own and collect. "Some" I have seen could possibly be used as a magnifying flask, but that does not mean that they were originally made for that purpose.

If I am to define a magnifying flask, I would say it should not have a handle; it should have a very small base and a very small opening in the top of the flask. That still does not make it a Lace Makers Lamp; it could have been used by any person who wanted to magnify light, for example a watchmaker.

Just one final thing; I have never seen an illustration of a lace maker using one of these "lace makers lamps". Plenty of pictures showing the magnifying flasks though.

References

Bullock, Alice-May. *Lace and Lace Making*. B. T. Baysford Ltd. London. 1981.

There are two chapters that are of special interest to the bobbin historian. *Bobbins and Inscribed Bobbins*. There is a brief historical introduction and a short description on the making of bobbins. Her descriptions of bobbins are good and quite a large number of bobbin "Types" are described. The illustrations are black and white photographs and are reasonably good; they illustrate most types of bobbins found. The inscribed bobbins are similarly well treated. There are fewer photographs and they are of somewhat less quality than those in the previous chapter.

This is a very useful reference; it also has a good chapter on lacemaking equipment.

Groves Sylvia. *The History of Needlework Tools and Accessories*. Country Life Books. Hamlyn Publishing Group. Feltham 1966. Reprinted 1961.

A reasonable chapter on Bobbin Lace. Deals with Bobbins and accessories briefly. It is an excellent history book, but I would not buy it for the bobbin section alone

Hopewell, Jeffrey. *Pillow Lace and Bobbins*. Shire Publications. Princes Risborough. 1975. Reprinted 1994.

One of the valuable "Shire" publications that tackles "obscure" interests in a brief but informative manner. Lace is covered sparsely but bobbins are well covered. The reader should be aware of some possible inaccuracies. The only publication that makes any attempt at looking at the topic of Continental lace bobbins. Good illustrations.

Huetson, T. L. *Lace and Lace Bobbins. A history and Collectors Guide*. David and Charles. Newton Abbot. 1973.

A book that attempts to cover the topic of lace and lace bobbins in some detail. I can not comment on the "lace" content but the bobbin content is well done. It is particularly strong in the area of inscribed bobbins.

Whiting, Gertrude. *Old-Time Tools and Toys of Needlework*. Dover Publications Inc. New York. Reprint 1971. Originally published in 1928 under the title, *Tools and Toys of Stitchery*. Rather flowery prose used, but a most informative chapter intitled *Beautiful Bobbins*. Quite good illustrations. Has some interesting glass bobbins.

Wright, Thomas *The Romance of the Lace Pillow*. H.H.Armsrtong. Olney 1919. Reprinted Ruth Bean Carlton 1982.

Quite the best book for those interested in the historical aspect of bobbins. Not strong on illustrations and when they do appear they are poor photographs, but the text is invaluable as a record of original source material.

Yallop H.J. 1992. *The History of the Honiton Lace Industry*. University of Exeter Press.

Certainly the most scholarly text available on the history of the lace industry. Concentrates on the Honiton industry but covers the whole of England. He puts forward a contrary theory to the origins of the lace history in England. Tends to discount the Protestant refugee theory and offers the "astute English businessman" theory.

There is an excellent chapter on Honiton bobbins and their decoration.