

LACEMAKERS LAMPS

By Brian Lemin.

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 lacemaking 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, 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 Candlemakers Companion, by Betty Openheimer. A Storey Publishing Book Vermont 1957. ISBN 0-88266-994-x)

In history, we humans have been extending out 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, such as the Stormy Petrol were burned as a “candle”

In history that is somewhat more recent, candles were made either of “tallow” (i.e. animal fat) or beeswax. Tallow candles 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 rushlights!

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 lacemakers lighting kit was a tinderbox.

Let there be Light.

Light was clearly a problem for our Lacemakers. It is obvious that Lacemakers 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 lacemakers 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 lacemakers 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.

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) upon which the candle and the water filled magnifying flasks are fitted, is placed in the middle of the room. The laceworkers then arrange themselves around the light in an orderly manner that allows each person to have at least some of the light. The best lacemakers 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 lacemakers can be accommodated around the candle-stool.

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.

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 lacemaker 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)

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 candles stick that uses a large block of wood for its base. When more than one lacemaker 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 form “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 lacemakers lamps. This is where and adjustable candlestick (adjustable in height and in distance from the globe) is integral to the globe stand. This design first appeared in *The Woodturner* in Vol 3. August 1984 and more than a few wood-turners (myself 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. Nevertheless I have yet to see a genuine antique lamp of this design. Your help in this matter would be appreciated. (See also comments on Huetson below)

Discussion

Certainly we (lacemakers) know this arrangement as a lacemakers lamp, but it obvious that this arrangement was but a device for magnifying the light of a candle and were used by many artisans and indeed the gentry for writing. Recent 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 very clear and lacking the sediment and less prone to depositing scale on the inside of the glass, than that of well water. 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 was 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. I am afraid that I only have “Agnes forty” (nitric acid) so I am unable to see if the addition of sulphuric acid does give the water a bluish tinge. Since writing this an *Arachne* member has experimented and found that a few

drops does very little to create a bluish tinge, she also reminds us of the need for strict safety precautions when using this chemical. A warning well heeded by any experimenters feel sure that this statement of his must have been based on something that he had read that had impressed him. I am inclined to go along with his explanation. One other thing I should mention is that the larger the flask the better the light output.

Huetson (p 86) has an interesting illustration of lacemakers lamps. The nearer of the two has me curious. There appears to be two glass projections from the stem, one is probably a handle for carrying but the other looks as though it could be a ring in which a candle could be placed. Another thing about that illustration is that the base has a raised rim. Could it indeed be that it was to prevent the wax from the candle going on to the table? To me this explanation is very attractive but to be sure of such extrapolations, one would really have to see the original.

The "Love of Lace" by C.Hart and C. Calvert Workman Publishing. New York 1992 ISBN 1-56305-300-4 p 99 has a beautiful photograph of a glass candlestick and glass bowl stand.

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.

Conclusion.

The magnifying globes are very effective. Like a few Arachne correspondents, I have used them during power failures very effectively. The mind boggles at 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.

Just one more thought has come to my mind as I have re read this and also done some "in-between" reading. The term "lacemakers lens" cropped up in my reading. I am wondering if, when we come to the ornate lamps that are causing me something of a puzzle, whether the lace makers lens term became a generic term for a lace makers lamp? (The big problem about research is that one

question leads you on to another!! J .)

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.

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References

Please see the Bibliography page for references. I have put references in full in the article if it does not appear in the bibliography.