

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2011

The History of Domestic Lighting

Trevor Ottlewski gave a most illuminating talk to the February meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, on the History of Domestic Lighting.

Trevor explained that we now take lighting for granted. With electric lighting in the home or office, torches, car lights and street lights etc., there is so much light, it is difficult to get away from it. This is a relatively recent situation - and he recalled a man he had known in Wokingham who had lived all his life in the same cottage, with a pump in the back yard for water, and the only lighting was that from the open fire or a single candle lantern hanging in the parlour. People lived their lives in a different way - basing their working day on the daylight hours, and going to bed when it got dark. He suggested that the modern habit for people to stay up later than when darkness falls is probably due to television - and in that sense, we live a 'false life' now, not one governed by natural daylight. Gaslight only became available in this area from the mid 19th century, and even in the 1880s, discussions took place as to where to place street lights - and even then, people complained about the added light, so the facet of the lamp that faced a house would be blanked off. One road in Finchampstead did not get gas lighting until 1952 - until then oil lights, or in country houses maybe a battery supply was the best that could be had.



Lanterns and chamber candlesticks

Otherwise, candle lighting was the normal provided both inside and outside the home. Trevor demonstrated with a lamp such as used by Victorian policemen just how little light these provided. Fire had been known to man for a long time, but finding a way to light a fire was a problem. From the 15th century onwards, a steel struck against a flint would be used to get a spark, which could then light tinder. In the 18th and 19th centuries a fungus called amadou might be used for tinder - when one of the 5000 year old ice men was discovered in the last few years, he was found to be carrying some amadou tinder, so clearly this had been known about for a long time. It was the late 18th century before experiments took place to find other ways to light a flame. One consisted of a tiny stick with sulphur on, which would make a flame when rubbed. Another was a match with potassium chlorate and sugar made into a paste on the end, and then dipped into sulphuric acid to create a flame. It was a Frenchman, John Walter, who invented the chemical match that could be struck to combust - the fore-runner of the present-day match. An alternative was a flintlock striker - as in a flintlock pistol, but arranged to light tinder, not fire a shot.

There were two basic forms of candle - either made from fat (tallow) or wax. The tallow candles were much cheaper, and could be made at home, but the wax ones burnt more cleanly. Even as early as 1030, brethren at

Abbotsbury are recorded as having to contribute beeswax to provide for the lighting. (The tendency for tv and film to show old cottages having many candles lit is not true - they would not have been able to afford it). The candles could be made by dipping a wick into the tallow or wax, allowing it to dry, then dipping again, to build up the size of candle, or by pouring the tallow or way over a wick - probably placed in a mould.

To support the candle, a candlestick would be needed, and Trevor showed examples from Roman to Victorian times. The candle was held by one of two methods - having either a socket into which the base of the candle fitted, or a pricket, which was a spike that was pushed into the base of the candle. There would be a tray to catch the drips of molten tallow or wax. The taller candlesticks would have a stem which in earlier days was made in two halves soldered together, and then most often splayed over into the heavy cast metal base (designed to reduce the chances of the candle being knocked over). Some of the stems had a spring or other mechanism to lift the candle, to keep the flame at a constant height, but also to help in its removal. Another style was the chamber candlestick, which had a handled wide tray below the candle support, without a tall stem, and could be carried from room to room. A variety of materials were used for the candlesticks - cheaper ones for cottagers having wooden bases, whilst others were of brass, copper, pewter or silver, or pottery ones by Wedgwood and Doulton. One variant, made of tin, was the hogscraper candlestick - a very basic design, where the base was shaped to help remove the hair from pigskin.



"Hogscraper" and Lantern



Rushlight holder

An alternative source of light was to use rushes. A piece of rush - which was readily available - would have 2/3 of its skin peeled off, and then once dry the honeycombed inner would soak up fat that had dripped from cooking meat. This created a long thin taper like item, which could be supported at 45o in a rush holder. It would burn like a candle - although would be rather smoky. If it was lit at both ends, it would give double the light - but for much less time - hence the phrase 'burning a candle at both ends'., and was probably the most common source of light in working people's cottages.

Trevor displayed many different styles of candlestick and lantern from his own collection. They included the basic cottager's types through to ornate ones, and those produced as 'commemorative' items.

Our next meeting is on Tuesday, April 12th, when Tony King will return to give us another of his presentations, this time taking us on a journey along the historic Old Bath Road from London as far as Reading. Then, on Tuesady, May 10th, Gerry Westall, who was a long term employee of Suttons Seeds, will be talk about the work that went on there.

All are welcome to our meetings, which begin at 8 pm in the Hannen Room, Mill Green. For more information about the Society, visit www.wargravehistory.org.uk