ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SPONSORED BY ROCKDALE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

53 Bruce Street,
BEXLEY.

10th February, 1967.

Dear Friend and Member.

The next meeting of the above Society will be held as follows:-

DATE. Friday evening next, 17th February, 1967, at 8 p.m.

PLACE. Council Chamber, Rockdale Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale.

GUEST SPEAKER.

Mr. Donald Sinclair. (Member)
Mr. Sinclair will present a paper, prepared by Mr. Eardley, entitled "PAT MOORE'S SWAMP" dealing with the topography, flora and fauna, and early settlement associated with the extensive area of marshland which lies between Bay Street, Rockdale and the northern confines of Scarborough Park. Mr. Edward Downs will show several slides relating to the area. A number of pencil sketches of the old farmhouses will also be on display.

Please make a special effort to attend this meeting. New members and friends most welcome.

Would lady members please bring a plate.

Gifford Eardley.
President.
59.8078.

R. W. Rathbone.
Hon. Secretary.
58.4813.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOUSEHOLD ILLUMINATION PRIOR TO THE GASLIGHT ERA.

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By Edward A. Downs.

Nowadays, the act of pressing a switch floods a room with light which can be directed or controlled in many ways to suit our convenience. However, it was not always thus. The origin of the first lamp is hidden in the dark and mysterious recesses of history.

EARLY LAMPS.

It may be fairly assumed that, next to implements for hunting and warfare, stone and clay lamps were among the first articles made by the hand of man for domestic use. Excavations in Egypt, Asia Minor, and southern Europe, in the countries of the older civilations, among the household utensils found, often yield lamps, or parts of lamps. Old lamps of sun dried clay have been unearthed from the site of the city of Nippur, one of the older of the Babylonian cities. As that city was destroyed more than 6,000 years before Christ, it makes the age of these lamps at least 8,000 years.

Later lamps were cut from stone and finally, when ores became known, they were fashioned from iron, bronze and other metals, and the shapes became more refined. Invariably the shape was the same - a hollow receptacle for the oil, either open or covered, a handle for carrying it, and a trough in which the wick rested. The Greeks and Romans made lamps from Alabaster and metals, finished with artistic ability of a very high order. Lamps were frequently mentioned in ancient writings. Homer, the Greek poet, in about 950 B.C. wrote of the lamps and torches used in the temples, and Herodites in 445 B.C. described the procession of lamps, an Egyptian festival, and remarked on the vast number and variety of lamps displayed.

An early mention in the Bible is found in Genesis, Chapter 15 - God is making His covenant with Abraham - "And it came to pass that when the sun went down and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace and a burning lamp." - and in Exodus are directions for making the golden candlestick for the tabernacle, and later in Exodus - "And thou shalt command the children of Israel that they bring thee pure olive oil beaten for the light to cause the lamp to burn always.", and a little further - "and he made his even lamps and his snuffers and his snuffdishes of pure gold." - showing that the ornamental lamps burning with a wick in olive oil were well known to the Hebrew artisans at an early age.

In Greece and Rome at outdoor celebrations, arena games and indoor feasts, illumination was by torches in metal baskets of resinous woods, fats and other inflammable material. An early Greek writer speaking of the pale smoky flame from fats and oils, said "One could not enjoy the good things of the table until his indulgence in wines had made him indifferent to the stench of the smoking lamps."

RUSH LIGHTS.

A very primitive and ancient form of torch or huge candle was made up of long stalks of flax or rushes pressed together and saturated with grease or tallow. These were used at older Hebrew weddings and other ceremonial occasions and were undoubtedly referred to by Jesus when He said - "A bruised reed shall not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench till he send forth judgment unto victory."

Rushlight was in general use continuously until as recently as last century, particularly among the poorer people of Europe, including Britain, from where this form of lighting found its way to the New World and Antipodes. The rushes were cut from the borders of streams or swamps and had many domestic uses thatching of cottage and outhouse roofs, weaving of basketware, and the covering of earth or stone-pathed floors. One cannot do better than quote from "Cottage Economy", a book written by Englishman William Cobbett in 1822, wherein he records in detail the making of rushlights. - "My grandmother, who lived to be pretty nearly ninety, never I believe, burnt a candle in her house in her life. I know that I never saw one there, and that she, in great measure, brought me up. She used to get the meadow rushes, such as they tie up the hop-shoot to the pole with. She cut them when they had attained their full substance, but were yet green. The rush, at this age, consists of a body of pith with a green skin on it. You cut off both ends of the rush and leave the prime part which, on an average, may be a foot and a half long. Then you take off all the green skin, except for about a fifth of the way round the pith. Thus it is a piece of pith, all but a little strip of skin in one part, all the way up, which, observe, is necessary to hold the pith together all the way along. The rushes being thus prepared, the grease is melted and put in a melted state into something that is as long as the rushes are. The rushes are put into the grease, soaked in it sufficiently, then taken out and laid in a bit of bark taken from a young tree, so as not to be too large. This bark is fixed up against the wall by a couple of straps put around it, there it hangs for the purpose of holding the rushes."

Of local interest, no doubt the first arrivals in the Colony of New South Wales made use of rushlight consequent upon the gathering of rushes, to serve their domestic needs of Sydney Town, at the waterside now known as Rushcutters' Bay.

Many types of holders and supports for rushlights were in use, mostly forged by the local blacksmith in the shape of a pair of iron tongs, one handle of which was drawn into a spike, which was driven into a suitable wooden block for table use, or so bent as required for driving into a wall. The other handle was movable on its pin, and curved outwards for convenience in handling the upward movement of the rush, which, as it burnt low, had to be continually moved and quite often replaced. A feeble light was shed which more or less made darkness visible. In later examples of this type of holder a candle supporting sconce was incorporated in the design of the rush-holder, thus giving the implement a dual purpose, either to hold and burn a rush, or secure a candle.

Specially designed grease pans, sometimes called grease-boats, were also supplied by the blacksmith. They were mostly fabricated from sheet wrought-iron, although cast-iron examples, standing on three short length legs, were also in common use. The rush-dips were generally stored in a circular metal box, fitted with a hinged lid, which served to keep them free from the attentions of rats and mice, animals which are most partial to a tasty bit of grease, irrespective of its type, age, or usefulness to mankind.

Apparently the aborigines of this continent did not know of lamps as such. Curiously enough, of the relatively more advanced natives of North America, only the Eskimos had lamps of stone, clay and bone, very important and highly prized parts of their household equipment, burning seal, whale and walrus oil, with wicks of moss.

IRON, TIN, PEWTER AND BRASS LAMPS.

The more primitive of the metal lamps used in the early Colonial days were the small iron "Betty" lamps, which were very similar in shape to the old Greek, Roman and Assyrian ones and precisely the same in operation. The body was usually cut or wrought in one solid piece, with a wick spout at one end opposite a curved upright handle to which was often attached a short chain with an iron spindle and hook and an iron pin, the former for attachment to the top of a chair and the latter for positioning the lamp by sticking the pin between the stones of a fireplace. Usually these lamps burned fish oil, but the light was feeble and the odour disagreeable.

A great variety of tin, pewter and brass lamps, following in principle the lines of the iron "Betty" lamps, was developed, burning fish oil, chicken grease, butter fat. Variety stemmed from the ability of the tinsmiths,and the softness of pewter lent itself to easy casting. The open spouts disappeared, and the wicks became encased in snuggly fitting tubes. Often the tubes and tops were made of brass, better fitted to stand the wear of being unscrewed every time the lamp was filled, for almost all the pewter lamps were filled through the same opening into which the wick went, as with the kerosine lamps of our own days. Larger lamps, known as "shop lamps" had two or three wicks. Some of the pewter lamps were quite like silver and polished well, probably almost pure tin, but more of the pewter lamps were like platters, mostly lead and not taking a high polish. It should be mentioned here that pewter is an alloy of lead, tin, copper and sometimes antimony and zinc; the main body is lead - the more lead the poorer the pewter, and the more tin the brighter and better.

This era of the domestic lamp brought forth many refinements - wall sconce mountings with tin reflectors, bull's-eye reading lamps with single or double lens, and rarely even glass chimneys which, however, did not become common until the introduction of kerosine. The oil lamps required certain attention apart from filling; the wicks were freed of encrusted soot after a night's burning, and sometimes a drop of turpentine was applied to keep the wicks in condition to light readily when needed. Some of the pewter lamps of the middle 19th Century burned camphene, a product of a refined turpentine; unlike whale or lard oil, it was highly explosive, and to prevent any danger of the flame getting into the oil font, the wick tubes were made much longer.

Quite common in the same period were small hand lamps with bell-shaped base and whale-oil burner, known as a "squat" lamp or "tavern" lamp; with heavy base and small oil capacity, they were commonly used in taverns, where the guest would be handed one to light his way to bed; and if, as frequently was the case, he had been drinking heavily, no harm would result if he dropped the lamp while navigating a difficult course or if he forgot to blow out the light; its small supply of oil would soon do that for him. These little lamps were often known also as "sparking" lamps. When the young lady of the household heard the footsteps of her favoured swain on his courting or "sparking" night, she would light one of these little lamps. The flame from it was not embarrasingly brilliant, and when it flickered and went out for lack of oil, that was a gentle but understood hint that it was time for the young man to find his hat, say goodnight, and start for home.

LANTERNS.

Lanterns were of very ancient origin. In China they have been in common use for thousands of years, their origin being lost in the dim mists before the beginning of authentic history; the use of paper lamps in temple worship dates back more than 5000 years B.C. References to lanterns have been made in early Greek and Roman writings and in the New Testament. The modern word "lantern" is a derivation of the old English word "Lanthorn", referring to the thin plates of scraped cow's horn which often formed the sides of the old English lanterns.

During the 18th Century lanterns became commonly in use on sea-going vessels. Made of iron, brass or wood, some of these lanterns contained candles, whilst others had small oil lamps, and most used glass for their windows.

With our brilliantly lighted streets of today, it is almost unbelievable that, after the sun had gone down, early Sydney Town was, as were even large European and American cities, left in total darkness, relieved only here and there by a feeble glimmer from a small lantern or torch at a gate or beside the door of a citizen, public spirited enough to be willing to help the faltering footsteps of his neighbours. It was to be some time before a comprehensive form of street lighting was installed; meanwhile hand lanterns lighted the way of more venturesome citizens. Some of these early lanterns carried candles, and were of various shapes - square with one or more glass windows, half-round with a glass face, or multi-sided with several glass windows. Similarly, the oil-lit lanterns were of various shapes, but some bore additional refinements - bulls-eye lens, fully round glass construction, and safety bars for special use; many had tinned reflectors; some were made of copper, silver-plated inside for better reflection and elegantly finished. Handles were of various shapes, but most common was a large round handle, with occasionally a small chain and brass extinguisher attached. Ventilators were decorative and necessary, mostly holes cut in shapes of stars, circles, triangles etc. or perhaps little hooded dormer-type openings. Some had mica windows, and other, colourfully, had cathedral-glass windows.

Hanging lanterns were often of more elegant design; earlier hall lanterns burned candles, but in the later ones whale oil was used. Beautiful work was put into the hanging frames of brass or bronze and particularly into the glass for the lanterns or the fancily shaped bowls, elaborately cut and etched, often in coloured glass, the whole usually supported by three bronze chains, with overhead a glass smoke protector.

Careless handling of glass lanterns is fatal; and for that reason are now rarely found with the original glass unbroken.

CANDLES AND CANDLE HOLDERS.

Candles were a luxury for many years. In the Seventeenth Century in England, they could be bought for not less than fourpence each, quite a sum in those days, and although most families used oil lamps on ordinary occasions, many kept a supply of candles for special occasions. Two distinct methods of candle-making were used, dipping and moulding.

The earlier method, dipping, was quite complicated, but basically it involved dipping cotton candle wicks into hot animal fat, cooling and dipping again until layers of fat built up the desired thickness of candle. This was quite slow and tiresome a task, but it was not uncommon for a skilled worker to turn out two hundred candles in a day.

The second process, somewhat later, involved the use of tin or pewter moulds, ranging from single candles to as many as eight dozen in a single mould, and was a much more rapid method of production. The twelve barrel mould was perhaps the commonest size, although six and eight barrels were nearly as usual. The cotton wicks in the barrels were held by metal loops and the tallow was poured into the moulds, thus encasing the wicks.

The earliest forms of candle wicks were called "prickets", consisting of an iron spike upon which the candle was impaled, and the spike was upheld by a three or four-legged iron stand. These were commonly in use in England and on the Continent.

Candle holders were produced in iron, tin, pewter, wood, brass, glass, silver, earthenware, and sometimes gold, with a bewildering variation in form, size, design, etc., in each material. Iron holders were somewhat crude and far from ornamental, usually in the form of a small cylinder attached to a broad base and sometimes had a slide in the cylinder which enabled the candle to be elevated as it was burned. Often these candle sticks had a lip of iron where the candle entered the socket, so that it could be hung on the back of a chair for reading or knitting. Later iron candle sticks, made by blacksmiths, were sometimes delicately and skilfully wrought.

For lighting early candles, unless directly from a fire on the hearth, was the use of flint and steel and tinder boxes almost universally, as friction matches were not invented until 1827, and did not come into general use until some time later.

Wooden candle sticks were mostly home-made, whittled out during evenings, and more ingenious than beautiful. Tin did not lend itself readily to ornamentation, but was a convenient material and acceptable for ordinary usages. So the demand for something better now brought about the general use of brass for candle sticks, and to a lesser extent, pewter. Since brass took a high degree of polish and could be eaily worked into graceful designs, a larger variety of old examples have survived to the present day, as they are almost indestructable.

Many of the tin and brass candle sticks were fitted with a "sconce", usually a round dish-shaped plate which acted as a reflector, as well as a draught protector, and often pierced with a small hole at the top to permit hanging on a wall.

There was endless variety of metal candle sticks; however, it was in glass that the designs really excelled, with common variation of the "dolphin" pattern, consisting of a heavy base on which a dolphin supported on its tail the candle holder, all moulded from glass. Glass candle sticks came in plain, sparkling silver, or coloured finishes and often their beauty was further enriched by a row of cut glass lustres hanging on tiny wires from beneath the candle holders, giving an effect of airy grace and beauty.

We have all heard of candle snuffers, which many people believe to be the means of extinguishing the candle light. In fact, snuffers were cutting instruments for trimming wicks of candles and lamps; they were made in a variety of scissor-like shapes of iron, steel, brass, Sheffield plate and coin silver. They derived the name snuffers from the burnt wick-end which was called snuff.

The older snuffers were simply scissors with one broad blade and a lip to catch the snuff which was thrown into the fireplace of a small "wick-end" box. Later came snuffers with a box on the blade.

Candles were extinguished by a cone-shaped cap made of metal, usually with a projection which hooked into a socket on the candle stick. Some extinguishers had a long handle to reach a candle enclosed by a shade or "hurricane" glass, which latter themselves were often engraved with detailed designs.

GLASS LAMPS.

The early glass lamps in use at the time of settlement of this country were usually simple in design with a round or square base holding an oval font with on top a brass or pewter cap which contained one or two wick tubes. An interesting variation was the glass "peg"lamp which would alone stand upright, but was designed for use in the top of a candle stick, and apparently a transitional development.

Glass lamps became available in more various designs than any other form of lighting up to their time, popular patterns known as "Hob-nail", Diamond", "Gothic Window", "Urn", "Heart", "Balloon", "Ripple", "Mushroom", "Star","Full Moon", to mention only a few, all identifying the shapes and details of bases and fonts. In time they were produced in an array of colours ranging from brown and vaseline yellow to amethyst and the ever popular rich deep blue.

The earlier lamps were without means of regulating the open flame until around the middle of last century, and developed gradually to the types we have known so well - some most decorative, some more utilitarian - the kerosene-burning lamps with wick controls, plain glass chimneys and fancy glass shades, still in constant use in many parts of the country. I can recall childhood evenings as recently as the 1930's reading under the light of a large and colourful glass table lamp in a farm house on the "Pleurisy Plains" of south-western Victoria, and clutching a flickering old "hurricane"lamp for a last call outdoors before turning in for the night.

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Although necessarily sketchy, these notes cover the story of domestic lighting to the period when kerosene and gas relegated the old oil lights and candle sticks from general use. The subject is vast in its historical extent, without consideration of the magnificence of the multicandle chandeliers, the exquisite astral and lustre lamps, and numerous other variations of the lighting devices of more than a century ago.

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