

# A Brief History of Lighting

Toby Pinn

Although we will not be altering the clocks until the end of this month the nights are already starting to draw in and before long summer will be but a distant memory. Today one of the most effective antidotes to the long dark evenings comes at the simple flick of a switch, thanks largely to Thomas Alva Edison. Many history books credit Edison as the inventor of the incandescent filament bulb but this is not strictly true. He is more accurately credited as creating the first practical commercial lamp in 1879. However, before the arrival of the electric light things were very different.

The domestic fire has been for more than 30,000 years the main source of illumination and continued to be the principle source of light long after oil, gas and electricity were discovered. Oil was the first fuel used for lighting but until the eighteenth century oil lamps provided a very poor light and a better alternative was the candle. Used by the Romans the candle today has decidedly romantic connotations, whether it be a candle-lit dinner for two or a relaxing bath surrounded by scented candles. The flickering flame is a distraction from our busy lives and takes us back to a romanticised idyll that probably never existed!

The reality for our ancestors was very different. Originally made of tallow (animal fat) the scented candles of today are a far cry from the sickly stench given off by the tallow as it burned. One eighteenth century recipe for candles recommended half sheep's fat and half bullock's fat and suggested that a thrifty housewife could, by careful collection of all waste cooking fat during the year, make enough candles to see the family through the winter! The main alternative to the candle in many homes was the rush light made from rushes gathered in autumn, dried and dipped in tallow. A rush light two and half feet long would burn for about an hour. One eighteenth century commentator writing on the subject of candles versus rushes was not very sympathetic towards his poorer compatriots 'Farmers use rushes...but the very poor, who are always the worst economists, and therefore must continue very poor, buy an half-penny candle every evening which, in their blowing open rooms, does not burn much more than two hours, thus they have only two hours light for their money instead of eleven!'

Candles could of course be purchased from the chandler but they were expensive and from Queen Anne's reign until 1831 were subject to a special tax! Worse still was the requirement in London from the fifteenth century until the late seventeenth century that every householder hang a lighted lantern at his door as darkness fell. If you were very wealthy you could perhaps afford beeswax candles that burnt with a brighter flame and had the advantage of giving off a much nicer smell than the tallow candles. Modern candles require no attention as they burn largely due to refinements in the petroleum-based waxes and the self-consuming wick. The wicks of tallow candles needed trimming at least every half hour because the wick did not burn away completely, causing the candle flame to gutter, not only creating a lot of smoke but also consuming the tallow much faster. The special tool to trim the wick looks like a pair of scissors but with the addition of a small box to contain the piece of spent and charred wick.

No story of lighting would be complete without a mention of gas lighting which, although used by the ancient Chinese who collected natural gas in animal bladders, was not a commercial reality until the early eighteenth century. By 1816 the streets of London were for the most part illuminated by gas produced from the burning of coal and as the century progressed its use as a domestic light source increased remaining popular even after the widespread adoption of the electric light. Although the reliability and longevity of the electric light bulb has increased over time it is fair to say that in the century since its widespread assimilation into domestic life very little real improvement has been made on the original filament bulb. Power cuts are so rare these days that few people keep that box of white Price's candles beneath the kitchen sink ready in the event of a power failure.

The next time a waiter lights the candle as you peruse the menu spare a thought for your poor ancestors who would probably have been just as concerned about collecting the fat from your fillet steak to make candles as much as eating it!

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Pair of 17thC brass trumpet based candlesticks with mid drip-pans and ribbed cylindrical stems, c1660, 7.5in. *Gorringes, Sussex. Mar 02. HP: £4,400. ABP: £5,175.*



Pair of French gilt metal storm lanterns, each with a square section blue glass plinth, bell shaped glass shades supported on turned over leaves, 40cm high overall. *Dreweatt Neate, Donnington. Nov 02. HP: £650. ABP: £764.*



Set of 4, Georgian gilt bronze, twin branch wall lights, of Adamesque design, volute scrolls, classical urn & flambeau finial back plates, pair of acanthus leaf lappet square section arms, hung with honeysuckle swag, fitted for electric. Each 45cm long. *Rosebery's, London. Sep 04. HP: £1,700. ABP: £1,999.*



Early 20thC blue glass chandelier, blue/clear glass prism and star cut band, four tiers of graduated drops and a pendant sphere, 38cm high x 36cm wide. (some replacements) *Dreweatt Neate, Donnington. Nov 02. HP: £650. ABP: £764.*



Pair of brass electroliers, in Dutch style each with 3 tiers of 6 scroll arms and baluster stem, sphere base, 120cm high. *Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Nov 05. HP: £1,250. ABP: £1,470.*



Brass hall lantern, fitted with four painted and coloured leaded glass panels, painted with various birds in flight, early 20thC, 63cm high. *Rosebery's, London. Jun 05. HP: £480. ABP: £564.*



Pair of Victorian oil lamps, each with clear chimney and etched spherical opaque shade, facet cut cranberry glass reservoirs, Corinthian brass columnar and stepped square bases, 84.5cm. *Locke & England, Leamington Spa. Jan 05. HP: £850. ABP: £999.*



Twin branch candelabrum, early 19thC, gilt metal scrolled arms, prismatic drops and a cut column, with damage, 31cm. *Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Feb 05. HP: £220. ABP: £258.*