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OLD WEST SURREY

SOME NOTES AND MEMORIES

BY

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*With 330 Illustrations from Photographs
by the Author*



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CHAPTER IV

CANDLE-LIGHT AND CANDLESTICKS

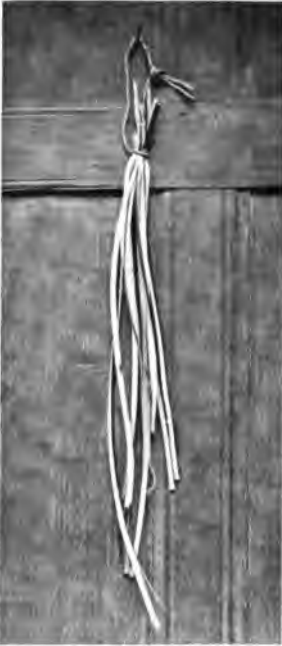
IN these days of cheap matches and lamps for mineral oil, one can hardly realise the troubles and difficulties in the way of procuring and maintaining artificial light for the long dark mornings and evenings of nearly half the year, that prevailed among cottage folk not a hundred years ago. Till well into the third or fourth decade of the nineteenth century, many labouring families could afford nothing better than the rush-lights that they made at home, and this, excepting fire-light, had been their one means of lighting for all the preceding generations.

In the summer, when the common rushes of marshy ground were at their full growth, they were collected by women and children. The rush is of very simple structure, white pith inside and a skin of tough green peel. The rushes were peeled, all but a narrow strip, which was left to strengthen the pith, and were hung up in bunches to dry. Fat of any kind was collected, though fat from salted meat was avoided if possible. It was melted in boat-shaped grease-pans that stood on their three short legs in the hot ashes in front of the fire. They were of cast-iron; made on purpose. The bunches, each of about a dozen peeled rushes, were drawn through the grease and then put aside to dry.

An old cottage friend told me all about it, and though winter was only just over, and the rushes barely grown, and

she ninety years of age, yet, when next I want to see her, she had gone out and found some rushes to show me how it was done. 'You peels away the rind from the peth, leaving only a little strip of rind. And when the rushes is dry you dips 'em through the grease, keeping 'em well under. And

my mother she always laid hers to dry in a bit of hollow bark. Mutton fat's the best; it dries hardest.'



PEELED RUSHES FOR
RUSH-LIGHTS

Rush-light holders were mostly of the same pattern as to the way the jaws held the rush, the chief variation being in the case of the spring holders, which were the latest in date. In these the jaws were horizontal. But the usual and older pattern had the jaws upright, their only difference being in the shape and treatment of the free end of the movable jaw and the shape of the wooden block. The counter-balance weight was formed either into a knob or a curl. Occasionally it had somewhat the shape of a candle-socket. Later, when tallow dip-candles came into use, the counter-

balance was made into an actual candle-socket.

The rush-light was held as shown. When it was a long one a piece of paper or rag was laid on the table to keep it from being greased by the tail of the rush. 'We set it on something so as not to mess about,' as my old friend said. About an inch and a half at a time was pulled up above the jaw of the holder. A rush-light fifteen inches long would burn about half-an-hour. The frequent shifting



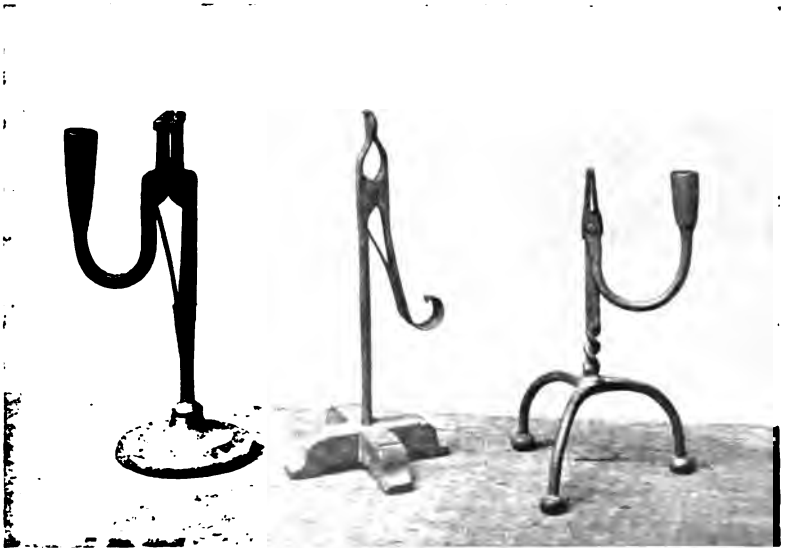
GREASE-PANS



RUSH-LIGHTS AFTER BEING DIPPED IN GREASE



SIX RUSH-LIGHT HOLDERS



RUSH-LIGHT HOLDERS. THE TALLEST $9\frac{1}{2}$ INCHES

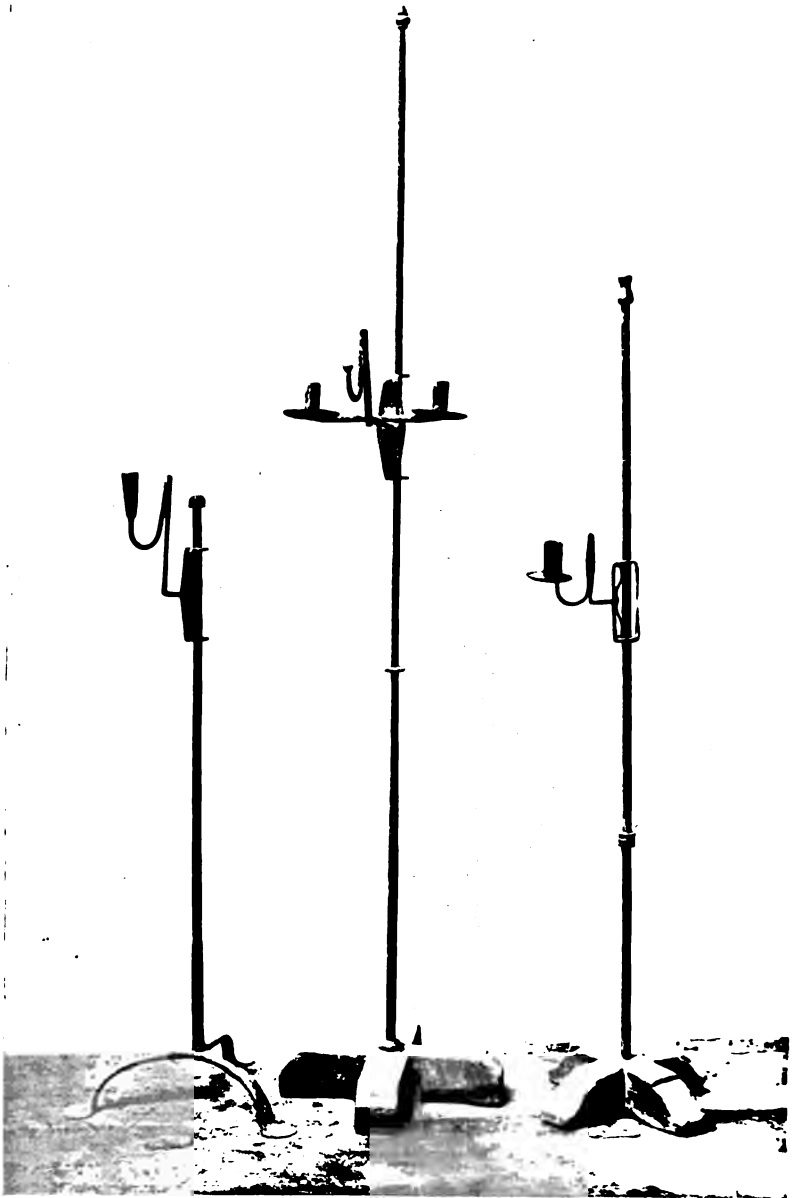
was the work of a child. It was a greasy job, not suited to the fingers of the mother at her needle-work. 'Mend the light,' or 'mend the rush' was the signal for the child to put up a new length.

Two pins crossed would put out a rush-light, and often cottagers going to bed—their undressing did not take long—would lay a lighted rush-light on the edge of an oak chest or chest of drawers, leaving an inch over the edge. It would burn up to the oak and then go out. The edges of old furniture are often found burnt into shallow grooves from this practice.

There were several kinds of tall rush-light holders to stand on the floor, both of wood and iron. The iron ones have nearly always a candle-socket in addition, indicating a later date, and the



RUSH-LIGHT IN THE HOLDER



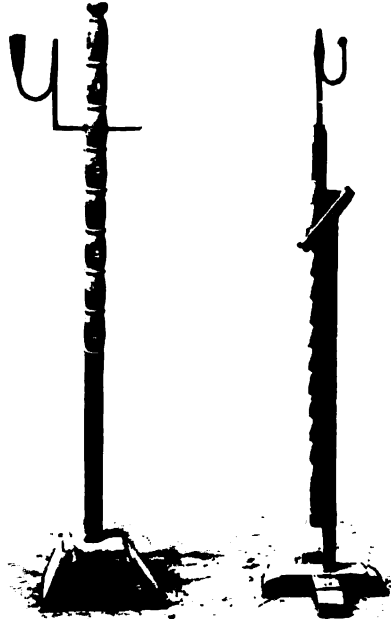
STANDING RUSH-LIGHT AND CANDLE-HOLDERS

same kind of spring arrangement to allow of the light being adjusted to the right height. Unless all of iron, as in the three-legged one in the illustration, they nearly always had the cross-shaped block for a foot.

The rough block to one wooden one is not its proper foot, but only a temporary make-shift. In this the standard is pierced alternate ways in each turned division, and the iron is shifted in and out. The other is a very old pattern, as may be known by the iron having no candle-socket. It works up and down with a ratchet and loop after the manner of a hanger.

The only means of obtaining a light in the morning, if no red spark remained in the fire, was by the flint, steel, and tinder. Every cottage had its tinder-box; a round box

of thin sheet iron, with or without a candle-socket on the lid. It contained a loosely-fitting disk with a ring handle; this was the damper to quench the tinder. The box also held the flint, steel, and one or two sulphur matches. These lifted out with the damper; some tinder was underneath. The fragment of flint was commonly chosen with a nice hollow place to fit the thumb, such as occurs frequently in



WOODEN STANDING RUSH-LIGHT
HOLDERS

its natural fracture, and a blunt edge for the striking part.

The steel was made of a good piece of metal, generally an old file. It was held over the fingers of the left hand, and struck with the flint held in the right. After a few strokes a spark would fall on to the tinder in the box; this was



IRON TINDER-BOXES

gently blown, and the tip of the match applied, when, if good luck were on the side of the housewife, she might get a light, or, on the other hand, she might have to try many times. The matches were thin slips of dry wood about three inches long and pointed at the ends. These ends were dipped in melted brimstone. A sluggish spark on the tinder was sometimes urged into activity by a tiny pinch of gunpowder.



SULPHUR MATCHES

Men in the fields would pick up a bit of flint and strike it on the backs of their knives; they had a piece of touch-paper in their pockets, and so got a light.

The tinder was made of cotton or linen rags—'Blue rag is the best,' one old friend tells me, but another said they used to favour the feet of old cotton stockings. 'You takes your bit of rag in the tongs and holds it to the fire;

when it's just well alight you drops it into the box and quenches it with the damper.'

A better class of tinder-box was made of brass, and has the same kind of straight handle as the good, simple hand-



BRASS TINDER-BOX AND BRASS CANDLESTICK

candlestick, also of brass, of frying-pan shape—a pattern that was widely used, for it was made also in silver.

'The first lucifer matches I ever seen,' said one of my old neighbours, 'was in the year 1839. They came from

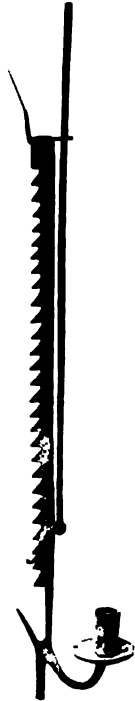


CANDLE-BOX

Southampton and were called Congreves, and were sold by the gross. I think they were made in France.'

An improvement on the rush-light was the rush-candle,

with the same material for wick, but much thicker, in that it was dipped several times in the grease, gaining thickness with each successive coating. These were the candles used in the sockets added to the rush-light holders. They were kept in the sheet-iron candle-box, which also served in later



HANGING IRON CANDLE-
STICK



IRON CANDLESTICK DRIVEN
INTO POST

years for the tallow candles with cotton wicks of more modern make.

An iron hanging candlestick, with alternative arrangement for a rush-light, hung over the great farm dining-table. It had a loop and ratchet arrangement like a hanger. The fixed jaw of the rush-holder, an upward continuation of the



IRON SPIRAL CANDLESTICKS



IRON TRIVET AND KITCHEN CANDLESTICKS

lower straight piece, is wanting in this example. It has been broken off. These candlesticks were generally so hung that they could be swung up and passed over a nail or hook, to hang up horizontally along one of the heavy chamfered joists out of the way until wanted.

There were several patterns of iron candlesticks for fixing to a post or the joints of a wall by driving in the spikes at the back of the upright. One of these is shown. Another is just like an iron tobacco-pipe with a thick straight stem about eight inches long. The driving end is partly pointed and partly flattened horizontally, showing that it was meant to be driven into a mortar joint.

Some of the earliest candlesticks were made of a close spiral of strap-iron. The candle, as it burnt shorter, was raised by an ingenious device, whose action will be understood from the illustration.

The plain iron kitchen candlesticks were in use till well within my recollection. The iron trivet is of some antiquity, although it is evidently made to fit on to the front bars of an iron grate.

A candlestick with a many-jointed folding arm was sometimes made; never a



IRON CANDLESTICK WITH JOINTED ARM

very satisfactory thing, as each joint is a source of weakness. The one shown draws out to a length of two feet ten inches.

Brass candlesticks of good design were made in the eighteenth century, and have come down to us with their edges only slightly and even pleasantly blunted by much polishing. The picture with five pairs shows some of most usual patterns. They were favourite chimney ornaments

both in farmhouse and cottage, and were handed down with pride from generation to generation. The three pairs are of a redder metal—some alloy containing a larger proportion of copper.

The two pairs with the low-placed grease-plates look as if they might have been church candlesticks, though they came to me from cottage sales.

Snuffers were the necessary companions of the later



BRASS CANDLESTICKS

tallow candles with their thick wicks. The commoner snuffers were iron, the better class of brass. A very old pair of iron snuffers is shown at p. 76. The left-hand tray in the illustration is of a usual pattern, in rather thin stamped brass. The other tray, without ornament, is of a good simple design, solid and well-made.

Though not properly belonging to a cottage, a contrivance for striking a light, of which a fair number remain, may be



RED BRASS CANDLESTICKS



BRASS CANDLESTICKS



BRASS SNUFFERS AND TRAYS

mentioned. This is a flint-lock with a small pan for tinder, looking something like a stumpy pistol. Instead of a barrel it has a pair of short brass legs and a candle-socket. It is shown before and after striking. The flint strikes and throws open the hinged lid of the pan, flinging a spark upon the tinder.



FLINT-LOCK FOR IGNITING TINDER