

Lighting for the English country house in the 18th century



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ABOVE:
Fig. 1 A single lit candle

BELOW:
Fig. 2
A typical French 18th-century chandelier

It was in the 18th century that country houses became comfortable. In the 17th century houses were rather sparsely furnished, with simple oak furniture, family portraits in oils, and, if you were really grand, gilt-wood furniture and tapestries. Dining-rooms as we know them today did not exist and it was not until the second half of the 18th century that furniture moved away from the wall.

Throughout most of the 18th century after dark the only form of lighting, apart from firelight, was the candle, beeswax for the rich, tallow for the poor (fig 1). In the 17th century light fittings were usually made of metal, brass or iron, and, if they were to

be elaborate, they were metal structures decorated with rock crystal or glass drops. Such chandeliers were rare in England, a little more common on the continent, and this form remained the standard throughout most of the 18th and 19th centuries. Figure 2 illustrates a typical French example from the 18th century. In the 18th century the English did things differently.

Up until towards the end of the 17th century very little vessel glass was produced in England. (It is a pity that in English the word 'glass' has so many different meanings. When we talk about 'the glass industry' the layman thinks of drinking vessels, the glass historian of windows and bottles.) Vessel glass was largely imported from

Venice. However following the development of lead-glass in the last quarter of the 17th century all this changed. An increasingly large number of items were made out of glass, including light fittings.

The first item of lighting to be produced in glass in reasonable quantities was the candlestick, which before was only made in silver, brass, and sometimes in wood or pottery. Glass was not expensive, did not need polishing and was attractive. The viscous properties of early lead glass, and hence the need to manufacture stout, thick, objects suited candlesticks very well as they need to be robust. Figure 3 illustrates a four-branch candlestick which could also be used as a single candlestick, dated around 1700, with a stem form that is related to baluster wine glasses of the period.

by
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LEFT:
Fig. 3
A four-branch candlestick (V&A c. 521A-1931)

This candlestick is on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum, not in the glass department, but in the British glass galleries, (several of the most important items of English glass are to be found in these galleries, and the student of glass who only goes to the glass gallery will miss them).

Chandeliers in glass were not produced at all in England until the mid 1720s and one of the earliest known, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, still hangs in the Emmanuel College chapel Cambridge, where it has been ever since it was given to the college by Edward Hulse in 1732 (fig. 4). As can be seen this is not based on the continental model, no metal is visible, but it is based on the design of brass chandeliers of the period, (fig. 5) often to be seen hanging in an ecclesiastical setting. These early chandeliers were not



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BELOW:
Fig. 5
English brass
18th-century
chandelier

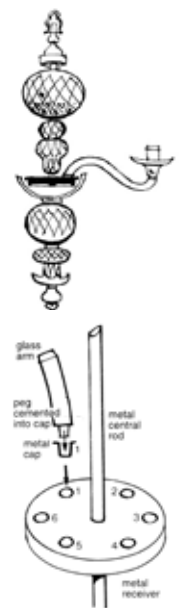


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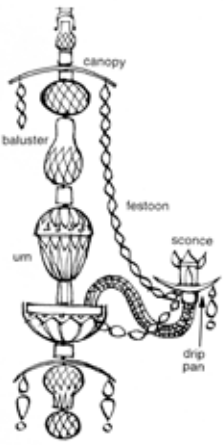
hung with drops and the arms were made all in one piece with the drip pan part of the arm. As its name suggests, the drip pan was to stop drops of wax falling into the hair of the fashionable ladies standing below. These drip pans were difficult to clean and their cleansing could cause brakeage of the whole arm, so by the 1750s loose drip pans were used, and by then sconces were often of glass rather than metal.

English chandeliers of this period were built around a central metal rod. Fig. 6a shows the layout of the early Emmanuel College type, plain with the arm all of one piece. Fig. 6b shows how the whole was held together via the central receiver plate, with each metal cap being numbered and having its own unique numbered hole,

ABOVE:
Fig. 4
Chandelier in
Wren's Emmanuel
College chapel
Cambridge



ABOVE:
Figs. 6a and 6b
Construction of an
English chandelier



ABOVE: Fig. 6c
Construction
of an English
chandelier

Right: Fig. 7
A chandelier
hanging in the
V&A glass gallery.
(V&A c.5:1-1931)



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BELOW: Fig. 8
English drops
made of glass as a
replacement for the
difficult to source
rock crystal.

BOTTOM RIGHT:
Fig. 9
Pair of facet-cut
candlesticks



these were not, and could not easily at this time, be made with such precision as to be interchangeable, and at exactly the same angle, but this did not matter as each arm was cemented while the chandelier was suspended in front of a grid, and held in exactly the correct position until the cement had dried. Very rapidly setting plaster of Paris was used for this. Then on to the next one. The same method is used to this day. Fig. 6c shows a chandelier similar to fig. 7, with separate drip pans and sconces, and the use of drops and festoons.

About this time ornamental drops became popular, copying the rock crystal drops that had been used on the continent. (Britain has virtually no mines yielding quartz, rock crystal, which is very hard and difficult to work). The illustration, (fig. 8) is taken from *The English Glass Chandelier* written by our member Martin Mortimer in 2000, and from whose pages I have learned most of what I know about chandeliers in the 18th century. Fig. 7 illustrates a chandelier of this period hanging in the Victoria and

Albert Museum glass gallery. These drops, some inspired by rock crystal originals, give extra body and sparkle to a chandelier and were usually made by specialist outworkers. In 1807 Thomas Osler started his business, which was to become the largest manufacturer of chandeliers in Britain, as a small drop maker on the edge of Birmingham.

Only the minority of rooms were lit from the centre by chandeliers, as they were expensive to light and too far away for reading. The candlestick, as we have seen earlier, was much more usual, and throughout the 18th century followed the same fashion as tableware and other glass objects. By the 1770s when waterpower was used for cutting, soon to

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be followed by steam power, facet-cutting was popular (fig. 9 opposite)

In the summer people rose when it was light and went to bed when it became dark, so artificial light was not much needed. In winter the main light would be firelight; all inhabited rooms would have had open fires in Britain, unlike the continent where enclosed stoves were common, (and much more efficient in using fuel for heating). However some more light was required for eating, sewing, reading, playing cards and other activities so candlesticks were needed. As were chamber sticks to light the way through dark corridors to closets and bedrooms, although they were usually not in glass, and needed a glass chimney shade to stop the flame being extinguished when walking. The quotes below emphasise the cost of good candles: Mary Delany 1700-1788, writing to her friend Mrs Frances Hamilton, discussed candlelight

The Earl reportedly sat with his wife discussing the painting of the room they usually sit in.... 'my Lord was for having an ash or olive colour as being cheaper and more durable. But my Lady objected that, although more expensive, the fashionable French white would be cheaper in the end, since it enabled the room to be lit with two candles rather than four'. (Author's note. French white was made from basic carbonate of lead, whose use would now be illegal.) ref follows

'Mrs Delany, the indefatigable Irish lady who went everywhere and reported everything, reported that when she visited Holkham Hall in Norfolk, 'My Lady Leicester

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worked at a tent-stitch frame every night by one candle that she sets upon it, and no spectacles'. Later Mrs Delany referred to a visit of King George III to the Dowager Duchess of Portland at Bulstrode, Buckinghamshire, in 1799, when she noted, 'Her Grace had the house lighted up in the most magnificent manner, the chandelier in the great hall was not lighted before for twenty years'.

Torchères and girandoles were commonly used in larger rooms. Indeed the four branch candelabra illustrated earlier was probably used on a tall wooden stand as a torchère, which gave light at a convenient height and could be moved around. Girandoles were usually used on mantelpieces and side tables, (fig. 10) as they faced forward and were not designed to be

viewed from the rear. As with torchères they were often placed before mirrors to double the light. Wall mirrors during the 18th century had candleholders attached to the, often gilt, wood, for the same reason. The Irish sometimes hung a demi-chandelier in front of an oval mirror – the V&A has a particularly fine example (fig. 11 next page). It is thought to have been made in Dublin c.1785 when Dublin was the second largest city in the British Empire.

The last third of the 18th century saw increasing complexity and grandeur in English chandeliers and they were often embellished with finely chased ormolu fittings. All great halls and assembly rooms had them, some with well-over 30 candleholders, which tended to make

ABOVE:
Fig.10
Pair of ornate
single light
candelabra
c.1770



ABOVE: Fig. 11
Demi-chandelier
in front of
an oval mirror
(V & A c.6-
1974)

the rooms extremely warm (fig. 12).

The most spectacular chandeliers at this period were made for Bath, its Assembly, and other Rooms. Jonathan Collett of London supplied five very large chandeliers for the Ballroom, much larger than had been made previously. Unfortunately the arms tended to snap off, the great length giving too much leverage near the stem. William Parker, chandelier maker of London, discovered that if the arms were tapered towards the end there was less strain on the junction with

the body of the chandelier and he was asked to provide replacements. Collett was allowed to use parts of his now useless chandeliers to make one large chandelier for the Octagon Room, where it still hangs.

Cleaning chandeliers has always been a problem. Large ones were often hung on cables that could be winched down to ground level for cleaning and lighting. Smaller ones, such as the chandelier in the Emmanuel College chapel were lit by tapers on long poles, extinguished by candle snuffs, also on long poles, and

cleaned carefully by men on ladders.

The very end of the 18th century saw the advent of oil lamps, particularly those based in the invention of M. Argand, but this, and the introduction of gas, and then electricity, in the 19th century, is the subject of a subsequent paper.

This article is a summary of a talk the author gave to the Glass Circle on 10 November 2016. The co-hosts were Maurice and Margaret McLain, David Giles and Lawrence Trickey. The talk also discussed Irish chandeliers, and whether they existed, however this is such a contentious subject that it will be discussed at a later date. Chandeliers were certainly assembled in Ireland, how many of the component parts were made in Ireland is more debatable. The original talk used 72 illustrations, and lasted 75 minutes, obviously impossible to reproduce in full here.

BELOW: Fig 12
Adam chandelier
c.1770 Note ormolu
decoration.

