

## The Aldermaston Candle Auction.

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AUCTIONS, in which the flame of a candle instead of the auctioneer's hammer, is the deciding factor, are rare in England today, but in the second half of the seventeenth century they were very popular. Perhaps the vagaries of the candle suited the reckless spirit of the age, for the newspapers show that at Lloyds, Garraways and other London coffee houses, casks of wine, bales of silk, ships' cargoes, and even ships themselves were auctioned by "an inch of candle."<sup>1</sup>

How candle auctions originated is by no means certain, but it seems as if they were of considerable antiquity. In Italy *vendita alla candela* is a term still used for an auction, and in France sales by the candle were a favourite means of disposing of property long before it became the custom in England. The closer intercourse between England and France, due to the marriage of Charles I. to the French King's daughter, Henrietta Maria, may have helped to encourage this form of sale in England, while exiles returning from their wanderings, when Charles II. was restored to the throne, probably gave fresh impetus to the practice. An official mention of these auctions can be found in the Records of the House of Lords for the year 1641, and proof of their growing popularity is shown in the words of John Milton, who, when Secretary to the Council of State in 1652, wrote "the Council thinks it meet to propose the way of selling by inch of candle, as being the most profitable means to procure the true value of the goods."

The procedure is simple. A pin is placed in the wick of a tallow candle, about an inch or less from the top, and when the candle is lighted, the bidding opens and continues, until the melting tallow dislodges the pin. The last bid made before the pin falls, secures the lot. Under these conditions an auction is still held at Aldermaston, and also at Old Bolingbroke (Lincs.), and Whissendine (Rutland). In this connection it is worth noting that the familiar phrase "You could hear a pin drop" can be traced back to the tense silence which prevails, before the pin falls, when everyone is waiting to hear the final bid.

Sometimes a slightly different method is used. An inch or less is cut from a candle and placed on a board, and the auction lasts, until the candle has burnt itself out, the winning bid being made as the flickering flame gutters out in a sea of melting wax. This is the practice at Chedzoy (Somerset), Grimston (Leics.), Broadway (Dorset), and Tatworth (Somerset).

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Lewis, "The Advertisements in the Spectator," Constable, 1909.

Great care was necessary to guard the flame of the candle from sudden draughts, thus ensuring that the auction should be absolutely fair. To do this, glass shields were sometimes used to protect the flame. One, which had survived, was found in an antique dealer's at Evercreech, Somerset, by Dr. Stephens of Newquay, who bought it and presented it to the Truro County Museum, where it is now exhibited. It is twenty-two inches in height with a folding base and eight and a half inches in diameter.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of every endeavour, accidents did occur, as is shown by what happened at a Candle Auction held at Steventon, Berks, in 1890. Grass on the recreation ground was being auctioned, when, to quote the Vicar, the Rev. A. L. Foulkes, "much amusement and some dissatisfaction was caused by the unexpected extinction of the flame, just as the bidding was becoming earnest. The lot in question consequently went too cheap and this was the last appearance of our time-honoured auctioneer—candle."<sup>2</sup>

References to sales by the candle are to be found in the literature of the Restoration. Andrew Marvell's line "As in an Auction to be sold by Inch of Candle" has a familiar ring,<sup>3</sup> and Sir Thomas Browne, writing to a friend in 1672 speaks of "Mere pecuniary matches or marriages made by the candle." But it is Samuel Pepys, that shrewd judge of human nature, who has given us the best description of the scene.

Pepys took great interest in these sales, which were clearly something of a novelty to Londoners in his day. On Nov. 6, 1660, he wrote in his diary "In great haste thence to our office, where we all met for the sale of two ships by an inch of candle (the first time that ever I saw any of this kind.)" Two years later, when attending another candle auction, Pepys' keen observation and shrewd psychology enabled him to paint a vivid picture of the gathering.

Under the date 3 September 1662, Pepys says "After dinner by water to the office, and there we met and sold the Weymouth, Successe, and Fellowship hulkes, where pleasant to see how backward men are at first to bid; and yet when the candle is going out, how they bawl and dispute afterwards, who bid the most first. And here I observed one man cunninger than the rest that was sure to bid last man, and to carry it, and inquiring the reason, he told me that just as the flame goes out, the smoke descends, which is a thing I never observed before, and that by that he do know the instant when to bid last, which is very pretty."

Candle auctions were legalised by statute in the reign of William III. in 1698, when it was stated that silks, muslins and other goods from the East Indies might be sold "openly and fairly, by way of

<sup>1</sup> H. J. Westbrook, "*Candle Auctions*," The Guardian Press, Warrington.

<sup>2</sup> The Standard, 18 October, 1892.

<sup>3</sup> The Rehearsal Transposed, II. 234.

auction, or by an inch of candle, within the city of London within the time of twelve months after the importation thereof."

The reign of Queen Anne was the golden age of sales by the candle. The number of coffee houses in London had risen from between two and three hundred in the reign of Charles II. to over five hundred, when his niece was on the throne. Moreover the War of the Spanish Succession gave English privateers the opportunity to lie in wait for Spanish merchant ships, and seize their cargoes of wine, spirits and stores. These were sold by auction in the Coffee Houses, and Lloyd's, which was established in Lombard Street, in 1691, became the centre of these sales. The range of goods sold was very wide including tea, china, wine, spirits, libraries, ships, and even slaves.<sup>1</sup>

Nor were candle auctions confined to imported goods. Such things as herbage grown by the roadside was often disposed of in this way. An Act of Parliament in the reign of George III. legalised the sale of herbage by candlelight. Hay from the Town Meadow is still sold in this way by candle auction every July in Croughton, Northants, and grass from the roadside was offered in the same way every year at Steventon, Berks, until 1890, and at Warton, near Tamworth, until 1933, when it was abandoned because the County Council has taken over the roads.

Sales of ships and merchandise by the candle continued until 1885, when the last sale was held at Lloyds. Twelve years earlier the Graphic contained a reference to the closing of Garraways Coffee House on March 25, 1873, after an existence of 216 years; a house which had been famous, not only for its candle auctions, but which was the first to retail tea as a drink.

Eleven candle auctions exist still in England. They are held at varying intervals, ranging from the annual auctions at Broadway, Croughton, Grimston, Ratcliffe Culey (Leics.), Tatworth and Whissendine to the one held once every twenty one years at Chedzoy in Somerset. In the majority of cases the auction is held to lease land belonging to the Church.<sup>2</sup>

Against this background it is now possible to consider the Aldermaston candle auction more closely. The auction is held once every three years in January, at 7 p.m. in the Parish Hall, to lease a piece of land known as Church Acre. The rent so obtained is used to defray Church expenses, after the cost of fencing the land has been deducted. The next Auction will be held in 1951.

<sup>1</sup> "The London Coffee Houses and the Beginnings of Lloyds" *J. Brit. Archaeol. Ass.*, n.s. XL. John Ashton "Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne," pp. 262-268.

<sup>2</sup> Variations of candle auctions are to be found in the village of Congresbury, Somerset, where marked apples are drawn from a bag; at Bourne (Lincs.), where the bidding lasts while two boys run a race, and at Wishford (Wilts), where the parish clerk auctions the grass on two plots of land, using the church key as a hammer.

It does not seem possible to find any direct evidence of the earliest date these auctions were held. In the official Report of Endowed Charities, it is stated that "by the award of 1815, there was allotted to the churchwardens of Aldermaston, in compensation for their lands, grounds and right of common, a plot of land in Church Mead, containing 2 acres, 1 rood and 33 poles." No trusts were declared by the award nor is it known what land was previously held by the churchwardens but presumably it was about one acre

A tallow candle with a straight-fibred wick is used for the auction, thus ensuring that it will burn at a steady rate, and sufficiently slowly for numerous bids to be made before the pin is dislodged. When in 1928 the old tallow candle was completely burnt out, the Vicar of Aldermaston, who acts as auctioneer, found considerable difficulty in replacing it, but one was specially made at Newbury, which was used for the first time in the auction in 1932, when the pin was inserted a third of an inch from the top, and fell out after an interval of twenty minutes.

The procedure is simple. The Vicar, churchwardens, bidders and spectators assemble in the Parish Hall at 7 p.m. on the January evening. The tallow candle in an enamelled candlestick is placed at one end of the hall on a small table. A large pin (preferably a scarf or tie pin) is placed in the candle, about half an inch from the top. The Vicar reads an extract from the Endowed Charities Report, and when the candle is lighted, the bidding begins.

Competition is now much less keen and far fewer people attend the auction than they did thirty years ago, when Mr. C. E. Keyser, the lord of the manor, lived at Aldermaston Court. Then it was a gala occasion, with a packed room, excited bidding, and a social evening with refreshments for all who attended the auction. In spite of the fall in attendance, prices have remained remarkably steady over a number of years, in 1893 the highest bid was £7 5s. and in 1945 it was £8. Only in 1935 did the price drop to 75/- and this was due to a contretemps.

After the bidding had opened at £1, and risen to £2, it then slackened, as the candle was burning so steadily that it seemed as if at least ten minutes or longer must pass before the melting tallow loosened the pin. Gradually other competitors entered into the contest, more bids were called, rising by five shillings a time, until seventy-five shillings was called. At this moment, to everyone's amazement, the pin gave a sudden lurch and fell into the candlestick. This brought the proceedings to an abrupt and unwelcome end. Everyone had been waiting for the pin to wobble, as it usually does, when the end is near, but the Vicar had no option. He declared the last bidder to be the new tenant of Church Mead for the next three years, and entered his name

and the amount of his bid in the auction book kept for that purpose.

Amongst other Berkshire villages in which candle auctions were held were Steventon and Stanford-in-the-Vale. At Steventon, where the auction was held every year to sell the grass cut on the recreation ground, the practice was discontinued in 1890, owing, as has been already related, to the vagaries of the candle. At Stanford-in-the-Vale, five or six pieces of grassland and verges for grazing cattle were put up for auction annually, until the custom was abandoned in 1931. The Faringdon engineer was in charge of the proceedings, and an inch of candle was used but no pin. Formerly competition was spirited to secure the grazing rights, but increasing motor traffic made roadside grazing too dangerous for both cattle and motorists, so the local council decided to discontinue the auctions.

A brief summary of the procedure in the candle auctions, which are still held, may now be given.

1. **ALDERMASTON, BERKS.** The auction is held once every three years to lease a piece of land known as Church Mead. See this article, pp. 37, 38 and *Reading Mercury*, 16 Dec., 1893.
2. **BROADWAY, DORSET.** The auction takes place every year on Jan. 6, to lease two acres of land, the parish meadow, given by William Gould in 1624, to make it unnecessary for the poor to work on the roads. When this form of compulsory labour was superseded, the rent from the land went to the Waywarden, and relieved the district road rate. When parish councils came into existence, they took over the William Gould Charity, and the proceeds are now spent on buying coal for poor families. The clerk of the Parish Council lights one inch of candle, which is placed on a slab of wood. The bidding starts as soon as the candle is alight and continues until the flame expires, the last bid being noted by one of the parish officers, as the winning bid.
3. **CHEDZOY, SOMERSET.** In 1490 A. Sydenham left a piece of land, known as Church Acre to the rector and church wardens to be let every twenty one years, the money so obtained to be used for church repairs. The sale takes place by candle light, half an inch of candle is lighted and the last bidder before the flame dies down is the lessee of the land. The last action was in 1949. In 1925 the sum realised was £77.
4. **CROUGHTON, NORTHANTS.** A crop of hay, from a portion of Aynhoe meadow, sometimes known as Town Meadow, is sold by auction every year in late June or early July, at the White Horse Inn. It is a survival of the old rights of common pasturage. A pin is inserted in the wick of the candle, and the winning bid varies from a few shillings to three pounds.
5. **HAXEY, YORKS.** The auction is held once every three years on Easter Monday.
6. **GRIMSTON, LEICESTERSHIRE.** A piece of land, which was left to provide money to pay for the curfew to be rung every evening, is leased annually by candle auction. Half an inch of candle is used.
7. **NORTHMOOR, OXON.** The auction takes place once in six years for the letting of a piece of land, the rent from which is used for church expenses. Records of the sales begin in 1853. The next auction will be held in 1952.

8. **OLD BOLINGBROKE, LINCOLNSHIRE.** A piece of land, known as "The Poor Folks' Close" was given many years ago for the benefit of the inhabitants, with the condition that it should be let by candle auction every five years. The last sale was held in March, 1946, the Rector presided, and a pin was inserted in the candle, which was then lighted. The price obtained varies from £12 10s. in 1920 to £6 10s. in 1925. See *Yorkshire Post*, 20 Jan., 1925.
9. **RATCLIFFE CULEY, LEICESTERSHIRE,** near Atherstone, Warwickshire. Land in the parish is leased every year at an auction at the Gate Inn. An inch of candle is used.
10. **TATWORTH near CHARD, SOMERSET.** Stowell Mead, a six acre meadow with a stream in which a valuable watercress crop is grown, is auctioned every year on April 8, in the parlour of the old Inn. The sale has been held for over two hundred years. Only those who own or rent certain lands in the village are allowed to bid; these are called members of the Stowell Court. An inch of tallow candle is placed on a board, which has been used for the purpose since 1832, and after the candle has been lighted, no one is allowed to cough, sneeze or speak, except to make a bid. Any transgressor is turned out of the room. Those attending for the first time are called colts and shod, and have to pay half a crown before they are allowed to make a bid. Sometimes the candle burns as long as three quarters of an hour. The man who makes the final bid becomes the owner of Stowell Mead for one year and markets the watercress crop. After the auction there is a supper, in which by tradition, watercress from Stowell Mead, blue Dorset cheese, onions and beer are served.
11. **WHISSENDINE, RUTLAND.** A stretch of pasture land, called the Banks is let every year by the Parish Council in March or early April. A pin is placed in the wick of the candle. The auction takes place at a meeting of the Parish Council, and the rent so obtained is used for the upkeep of a sheep wash used by the tenants of Whissendine. At the auction in 1948 the winning bid was only £1 15s., much less than in former years, but certain conditions attached to the land limit its attractiveness, and a fair, which used the land as a fairground, no longer visits Whissendine. In the old days this was a good source of income.

In conclusion I should like to thank the Rev. F. Newham, Vicar of Aldermaston, for so kindly lending me documents relating to the Aldermaston candle auction, and for a detailed account of the 1935 auction. I am, also, most grateful for valuable information I have received from the vicars of Broadway, Chédzoy, Old Bolingbroke, Tatworth and Whissendine, and for all the trouble they have taken in sending it to me.