
The origin of the word “Match”

by Jerry Bell

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I was reading a book recently about Robert Hoddle, the famous Surveyor General of Victoria whose work was the main reason why central Melbourne is so beautifully laid out, and I came across a letter in which he advised his assistants to take with them on their journeys into the bush “flint, steel, tinder and matches.”

Perfectly normal, you would say. What is so odd about that? Well, for a start, the note was written in 1825, two years before the first friction lights were marketed by John Walker, and secondly, just what would these assistants have been carrying which could be described as matches? I thought I would take the trouble to find out, as I had no idea.

Well, it appears as if our word “match” dates from as long ago as 1377 no less, when it was first used to mean a wick of a candle or a lamp. From then, it progressed to an instrument containing a wick, which could be a rope of hemp or cotton, which when lit, was not easily extinguished. It was used in such a way from 1500 onwards, and the infamous Guy Fawkes, of the Gunpowder Plot, was caught with a match in his hand, so the story goes.

From 1700 onwards, a Slow Match was developed by this method, which was a twisted hemp cord steeped in saltpeter and lime water, which had to burn at the rate of one yard every three hours, and which was used to fire cannon on ships and other similar purposes. A Quick Match, by comparison, was made of cotton, and steeped in saltpeter only.

However, by 1530, another meaning had emerged, when a match became an article for domestic use being a piece of cord, cloth, paper or wood dipped in sulphur, which, of course, burnt very well when a flame was applied to it, but, of course, could not be struck to produce that flame.

By the 18th century, wooden sticks dipped in sulphur were in widespread use for carrying a flame from a fire, tinder, or candle to light smaller fires, pipes, lamps, torches or anything else that needed to be set fire to. Sulphur sticks were called matches, and the “matches” referred to by Robert Hoddle in 1825 would almost certainly have been these. The sulphur helped to get the wood of the sticks to burn, and later paraffin wax was also used for this purpose.

Mind you, sulphur can be a bit on the smelly side, so that when similar sticks of wood or wax that could be tipped with a less noxious chemical compound and struck on a rough surface to create a flame were developed, the sulphur sticks were quickly replaced by the new “matches”, and this meaning, first used in 1831, is the one that applies today. *[Source: Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition]*