

HOBBY HISTORY

History Of The Match: I

[This information has been taken from Match-Box Labels of the World, author and date unknown, but it was probably in the late 1940s. This first part covers John Walker, a subject which has been done to death within the hobby, but the information here adds a number of points not covered elsewhere, I believe. Note: This series is complimentary to our previous series, "The Tortured History of the Match"]

The First Friction Match: Its Inventor, John Walker

During the latter half of the 1826, the first friction match, as we know it, was invented by John Walker, a north-country chemist. A middle-aged bachelor, his quaint old-fashioned bow-fronted shop, with its tiny diamond pane windows, in the High Street of Stockton-on-Tees, was a well-known landmark in the town.

Born in May 1871, the third son of an elder John Walker, grocer and wine merchant of Stockton, he was articled to Watson Alcock, county Durham, leading surgeon. Impressed by his pupil's uncanny ability to absorb his medical studies, he raised him to his personal assistant, but Walker, unable to conquer a growing aversion to witnessing and performing surgical operations, ultimately threw up his profession at the age of 38 and adopted that of a druggist, setting up his new business in the High Street, taking up his residence with a niece in a fine house on the riverside, with a splendid lawn in front running down to the water's edge.

A small, dapper little man, invariably cheery and good-humored and a great favorite with his customers, he habitually wore a brown tailcoat, knee breeches, white cravat and a tall beaver hat. He was a born scientist and keenly interested in botany, mineralogy, and chemistry. He spent his time between chemical experiments in the rear of his shop, amid an array of test tubes, liquids and mysterious substances, and roaming the countryside collecting botanical specimens, which he studied, classified, and preserved with scientific thoroughness.

During one of his experiments, he made the

discovery that has been one of the greatest boons to mankind, for it resulted in the first friction match. His friends urged him to patent his invention, but the little chemist refused. "The idea is not sufficiently important to warrant it," he retorted.

Walker's friction matches were sold in round, tin containers for one shilling a hundred, and twopence for the tin. His first recorded sale, in the ledger he scrupulously kept, was made on 7th April, 1827—to a Mr. Hixon, a Stockton solicitor, in which he refers to them as "Friction Lights," although he probably began selling his lights late in 1826.

Walker's earliest lights were fitted with cardboard stems, but he quickly improved on this by using wooden splints, employing aged inmates of Stockton almshouses, who splint them by hand. Later, he also employed the elder pupils of the local grammar school, paying them sixpence per hundred. At first, they cut the splints by hand, with a knife, from the edge of a flat piece of wood planed to one-sixth of an inch thickness and three inches in length. Walker's lights all had wooden splints just three inches long, one-sixth of an inch broad, and one-twentieth thick, unlike the modern match, which is usually square in section.

One of the pupils, thinking to mass produce the splints, sought to abolish the tedious task of cutting the sticks by hand by using a jack-plane. This put a curve on the splints so they would not lie flat in the box. Walker was annoyed at this and promptly gave up on his part-time employees at the school.

The tin containers were gradually replaced by pasteboard boxes, contracted from a local bookbinder, John Ellis, for three-halfpence each. In each box, a piece of sandpaper was inserted with the matches. To ignite the light, the head of the match was placed on the folded sandpaper and drawn out sharply, when, if the head did not come off, as was often the case, the match flared into a fizzling crack, similar to modern fireworks—the fuzee match beloved by boys on Guy Fawkes night.

Walker never attempted to sell his matches on a wide scale, but met only the local demands in the vicinity of Durham.

Commercial cliques now pressed him to do so, but he still refused to patent the invention or form a company to exploit it. Instead, he simply carried his matches as a proprietary line, as was the general

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