

'Tis the Season...for Victorian Christmas Lights

by Rick Baldwin



A grouping of early blown, pontil-scarred Victorian lamps

Nowadays, the Christmas holidays are adorned with colorful indoor and outdoor electric lighting decorations...but this custom was initially popularized during the 1800's in Victorian England, thanks to Queen Victoria, along with other Yuletide traditions, such as the "Christmas tree" custom introduced at Windsor Castle. In that era, single-piece glass illumination "tumbler" lamps were employed for festive lighting, which contained either a candle or an oil-fueled wick. Similar traditions employing such illumination lamps soon became popular in Australia, Scandinavia, Germany, France

and throughout Europe. Commonly referred to as "Christmas lights" in the U.S. because of their celebratory and festive usage, these Victorian illumination lamps represent a class of vintage glass collectibles that possess historical provenance, a diversity of form and color and a relative ease of acquisition. During the Christmas holiday season, these lamps are sought after for decorations, and lamps in the more common patterns can be found at antique malls, as well as at Internet auction sites. Typically, these lamps, which were produced in every color of the rainbow, had patterns in the glass that aided in refracting and reflecting the light produced. These lamps are also commonly referred to as "fairy lights", but these lamps of English origin are characterized as possessing multiple pieces, such as a decorative shade and a cup-like base which held a candle.



A grouping of mass-produced, pressed Victorian lamps

The earliest illumination lamps can be traced back to the later eighteenth century...to such early artisans as Henry William Stiegel, a German-American glassmaker. Also, many early lamps were church votives, which made their way outdoors. The earliest nineteenth-century lamps made in significant quantities were pontil scarred and either free-blown or mold-blown examples, and they can be found in a variety of sizes, colors and workmanship-quality. A gather of glass was often initially blown in a mold to impress a pattern, such as diamonds, ribs, swirls or hobs, and then removed from the mold and expanded by the glassblower to finish the lamp. The lip was typically finished by folding the glass inward.



Scarce figural busts of British royalty

Around the early 1870s, glassmaking technology in England was maturing and flourishing, and the introduction of pressed glass manufacturing resulted in the illumination lamps becoming much more

abundant and affordable by the populace. In 1882, a patent was issued to James Pain for the mass production of lamps utilizing two- and three-piece molds. The most common lamps that collectors can



find today are mold variations of a diamond-quilted pattern, and these were mass-produced up until about 1920. This single pattern with all of its variations and colors can yield a large and diverse collection at an affordable price. Red and cranberry glass is less abundant and demands a little larger monetary investment to acquire. Scarcer lamps in the pressed diamond-quilted pattern can be found with letters or symbols on their sides, as can a few earlier blown examples with such. These colorful, mass-produced lamps were now becoming popular to decorate gardens, parks, carriages and buildings for festive occasions.

Another relatively common and abundant lamp form was also made in a diamond-quilted pattern and is embossed "Brock's Illumination Lamps" and the European country of manufacture around the base of the lamp. C.T. Brock, as well as James Pain, was in the business of staging extravagant fireworks-based "illuminations" for festive events, exhibitions and celebrations throughout Europe. These colored lamps were utilized to complement their productions, as well as to illuminate gardens, such as the Royal Gardens at Vauxhall and the Crystal Palace. In the 1920s, the Bournemouth Corporation purchased the remaining stock of lamps from Brock so they could carry on the tradition of the Victorian illuminations for visitors to their gardens during certain times of the year. Victorian and Edwardian parks and bandstands were also decorated with more permanent glass lamps, however, they were fueled by natural gas. The colored shades were fitted with a brass insert in their bases, which conveniently slipped onto gas jets protruding from a gas manifold.

There are several lamp forms that are attributed to U.S. origin. One

is a "lantern-shaped" form with a heavy wire handle that can be found with three known embossing variations - the most common of which being "Chicago Lamp & Candle Co." across the base. A scarcer lamp found in the same form is embossed "H.B. Thearle Co.", and Thearle was also in the fireworks business. Lamps were also made in the U.S. in the popular "thousand eye" pattern, which was prevalent in pressed glass in the 1900s. Becoming popular in America, the illumination lamps were utilized at several expositions, including the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

The most sought-after and scarcest lamps are "figural" in form, and these were primarily manufactured in England during the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, although some earlier scarce examples can be found. The London-based supplier "Hearn, Wright & Co." had



Illuminations at Vauxhall Garden in Victorian England

several figural forms manufactured by the Eclipse Glass Works to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. The forms included a "cluster-of-grapes", a "tulip" and a bust of Queen Victoria. Other highly desirable figural busts of British royalty are those of Edward VII, George V and Queen Mary, the latter two being made for their 1910 coronation celebrations by the Eclipse Glass Works after the Hearn and Wright partnership had been dissolved. Other lamp forms include various figural fruits and nuts, various geometric patterns and several styles with cameos of Queen Victoria on the sides. Other scarce lamps can be found with motifs of crowns, shamrocks, thistles and "Prince-of-Wales feathers". The first electrically-lit Christmas tree appeared in 1882, thanks to Thomas Edison's efforts to popularize the use of electricity. The White House added lights to their own tree in the late 1890s, but most of the populace used candles into the 1920's, when the price of electrical service decreased and more homes were electrified.

With respect to collecting and displaying these Victorian lamps, there is likely no other glass collectible category that can match the abundance of colors, patterns and unique handblown forms that resulted during their era of production and popularity. As with other collectibles, newer reproductions have been marketed, although most can be readily recognized. Additional historical information about these vintage collectibles can be found on the Ohio Bottle Club website.



Display of Victorian illumination lamp forms & colors