

# AN INTRODUCTION TO MATCH HOLDERS

*An era of extraordinary innovation and design*

by Ian Spellerberg

The December 2007 / January 2008 issue of *Antique Collecting* had a useful prequel to the subject of match holders. In an article on spill vases, Robin Hildyard referred to the invention of several kinds of chemical and friction matches in the early part of the 19th century and the subsequent demise of the spill vase or match pot.

The age of containers for friction matches commenced in 1827. It was the year that Ludwig van Beethoven died and a year later the Regent's Park Zoo opened in London. From about that time on, there was a demand for containers to hold those expensive but unreliable matches. The variety of designs and materials used by the match manufacturers was small and was eclipsed by the vast array of designs and patents registered by inventors, jewellers, ironmongers, toy makers and manufacturers of advertising novelties.

The title of this article should be 'An introduction to holders for friction matches'. Matches (as a means of transferring a flame from one place to another) were invented in the first millennium. This article is about containers for matches that were ignited by friction. From about 1830 onwards there was an extraordinary growth in the diversity of designs. Discoveries in nature and the growth in trade and travel around the world increasingly influenced many designs but perhaps most importantly was the fact that the great period of match holders spanned several styles including Arts & Crafts, Art Nouveau and Art Deco. Made in their hundreds of thousands, if not millions, match holders were made in many countries including Britain and Europe, North America, Asia, Australia and New Zealand.



Figure 1. A brass business reception bell with match holder.

The belief that match holders and smoking go together is only partly true. Matches were needed for many reasons in times of both war and peace. A match holder would be on a woman's writing desk for matches to melt sealing wax. Near the Victorian fireplace there would always have been a match holder or spill holder. Many match holders were used for advertising or promotion of products and services and others were expensive art forms. Many were given away as birthday gifts or as prizes at sporting events, and many fairings brought home from travelling fairs were match holders.

Throughout the Victorian era, match holders were essential items in all walks of life, something that few film directors and designers of

period plays appear to recognise. All too often much background detail is provided in Victorian films, plays and documentaries but the 'humble' match holder is obvious by its absence. The same could be said about books about the Victorian era.

There were four types of match holders. All held loose matches, or a matchbox or a match book. The first type, for which there were thousands of designs, was made to be carried in a pocket or a handbag. Today these are sometimes referred to as vesta cases after the 'vesta match'. The term 'matchsafe' is used in the USA and sometimes means vesta case. A plain solid silver match holder for the pocket cost between 10/6 and 17/6 in 1898 (about £50-£80 in today's money).

The second type of match holder was designed to be placed on tables and dressers in private homes and on tables in public houses and in restaurants. A third type



Figure 2. (Left to right) A small silver vesta case made by Gervase Wheeler, 1855, 1/2in. x 1 1/2in. An Austrian silver vesta case with enamelling. A small silver vesta case attached to a long chain (total length 51in.).

was designed to be fixed to a wall. In a Victorian household they could have been found in most rooms from kitchen to bedroom.

The fourth type was either a secondary part of another object (the name 'adjunctive' match holder has been suggested) or a component of a set of items. For example, counter bells in the reception area of some businesses might have a receptacle for matches (figure 1). Adjunctive match holders were found with a wide range of articles including cigarette cases, pipe stands, candle holders, lanterns and walking canes. Vesta cases might also be included in a travelling writing companion or in a woman's hair curling set.

Some match holders were similar to toothpick holders and contemporary trade catalogues sometimes had advertisements that showed similar designs for both matches and toothpicks. For the serious collector the distinguishing feature is the 'striker' or 'scratcher' – a roughened surface that provided a means of igniting friction matches. Some of the earliest match holders were originally snuff-boxes with a striker added at a later date. If there is no obvious striking surface then it's probably not a match holder. There are exceptions: for example, some match holders with no strikers may have been used in public houses where a separate 'scratcher' or 'striker' was on a nearby wall.

#### Match holders designed for women

There has been much written about match holders but little reference has been made to match holders that were designed for or used by women. The smallest and slimmest of all silver vesta cases (either with or without attached loops or rings) were surely designed for



Figure 3. A decorative wall match holder in white bisque.

women to be either carried in a purse or bag or worn on the end of a very long chain (figure 2). Some vesta cases with beautiful enamelling may have been favoured by women. While many wall type match holders were made of iron and were suitably plain, as was their function, others were colourful with feminine designs that could have graced the wall of a Victorian room (figure 3). Many table match holders were equally colourful as is shown by the Clarice Cliff Crocus design and the Moorcroft Orchid design (figure 4); the latter was a wedding present for a young couple in the early 20th century.



Figure 4. (Left) A Moorcroft Orchid design match holder. (Right) A Clarice Cliff Crocus design cigarette and match holder.



Figure 5. A desk match holder in the form of a casket, 4 1/4 in. x 2 1/4 in.



Figure 6. Match holders in the form of a shoe, a hat and a spirit level.

awarded to teenagers. For the Ellesmere Road Race in 1900, Charles L. Thomas was presented with a very fine combination silver vesta case and sovereign holder (figure 7). Such items are 'histories in miniature' and provide fascinating insights into our social history.

### Materials

The diversity of designs was matched only by the diversity of materials that were used. Almost any natural or manufactured material available at that time was used to make match holders (figure 8). The first containers made for the recently invented friction matches were mostly tin. Later, humble materials such as straw, papier mâché, leather and wood were used. More ornate match holders were made from ivory, agate and precious metals. Newly discovered materials such as vulcanite proved popular. Wall match holders were often made of metal, while glass and ceramic table match holders were common. As was the case with many other small items, some match holders were made from the materials recycled from famous ships or from

### Reflections of trades and professions?

Given that match holders were commonly in use, but valued for both function and design, is it possible that some designs reflected a person's trade or profession? There is no evidence, but it's an intriguing thought. Who else would have a match holder in the form of a casket than an undertaker (figure 5)? Perhaps a carpenter would have had, just for fun, a combination vesta case and spirit level (figure 6)? Thousands of match holders were made in the form of hats and shoes (figure 6). Perhaps some of these may have been given to valued customers with the purchase of a hat or pair of shoes?

### Special people and special occasions

In 1901, Colour Sergeant William Sheridan retired from the Robin Hood Rifles after 28 years of service. He must have been a very special person because the officers and men presented him with a beautifully inscribed solid silver cigarette case and an equally beautifully inscribed silver vesta case (figure 7, top). Match holders were given away as birthday presents, Christmas presents and often as school prizes at sporting events, some being



Figure 7. (Top) An inscribed silver cigarette case and silver vesta case presented to Colour Sergeant William Sheridan in 1901. (Below) A combination silver vesta case and sovereign holder presented to Charles Thomas in 1900 for the Ellesmere Road Race.



Figure 9. A match holder made from an artillery shell.



Left. Figure 8. Match holders made of straw (top left), agate and gold (bottom left) and papier mâché (right).

well-known trees that were once landmarks. Treen ware has its fair share of match holders and so also does 'trench art'. The bases of some artillery shells (figure 9) were ideal for turning into solid match holders for the table.

### Manufacturers and designers

Many match holders have no marks, base stamps or anything else that provides a clue as to their origins. In some cases however, the manufacturer's marks are well known and so well researched that almost every design made by that company can be accounted for. Such is the case for the Gorham match safes made in America (the subject of a recent book by Neil Shapiro and George Sparacio, published by the International Match Safe Association). British hallmarked silver and gold vesta cases have makers' marks. Some, such as S. Mordan & Co (SM, SM & Co), were makers of



Figure 10. Examples of advertising match holders and reusable containers for matches (all with match striking surfaces). (Clockwise from top left) Perry & Co Ltd, steel pen makers, Birmingham; BOS Scotch Whisky; Mannine Valbay laxatives; Fry's cocoa sample; Buchanan's 'Black & White'; Bendall's tea sample.



Figure 11. (Clockwise from top left) Vesta cases from Cartier, Louis Vuitton, Liberty & Co, Hermes and Tiffany & Co.

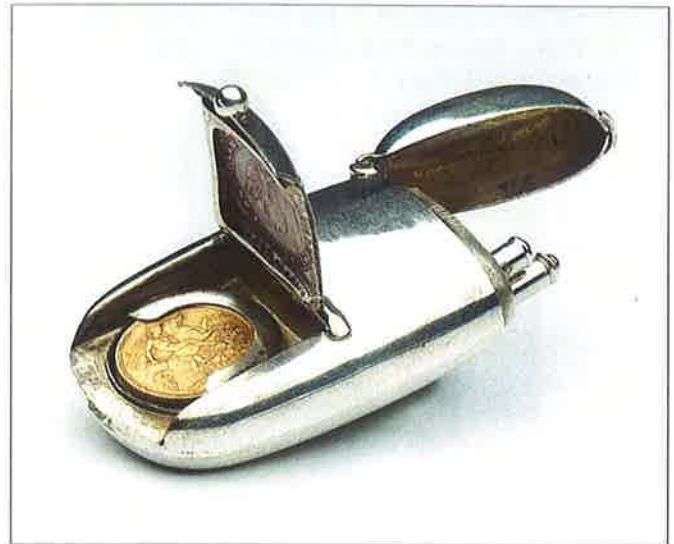


Figure 12. The 1887 patented vesta case (Albert combination match box) with compartments for matches, sovereigns, stamps, a pencil and a toothpick.

particularly fine solid silver and enamelled vesta cases made in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Possibly the ultimate in design and most sought after by collectors are vesta cases made by Fabergé.

Match holders were commonly advertised in trade catalogues but less so in newspapers and magazines. They were sold by department stores (sometimes by the gross), ironmongers and jewellers. Some novelty forms were sold by manufacturers of 'advertising novelties'. On cruise ships they were sold in barbers' shops. The diversity of designs reflected the fact that many were sold as souvenirs.

Advertising on match holders was ingenious (figure 10). Whisky manufacturers advertised on both vesta cases and on heavy ceramic match holders that stood on the bars of public houses. From wire rope to bicycle manufacturers, match holders were a lasting place to advertise your wares and services. Even more intriguing was the realisation, as early as the 1870s, that some small containers (such as for pen nibs) could also serve as vesta cases after the nibs had been used (figure 10). The added striking surface gave the small containers a secondary use. Pastilles, and samples of tea and cocoa were just some of the items sold in containers that could later be used as match boxes.

Some designers turned match holders into fashion statements and, not surprisingly, many were sold by well-known names such as Tiffany, Liberty, Hermes, Cartier and Louis Vuitton (figure 11). They were fashion accessories for every occasion. Some would be inscribed with the owner's initials while others had a brief personal message.

Match holders could be more than just a humble box to hide a few matches. Vesta cases in particular were seen as small compact containers that could also hold other items. The ultimate multi-functional vesta case

must surely have been the 1887 patent that also held coins, stamps, a pencil and a toothpick (figure 12)!

### Reflections on collecting

Early match containers such as the well-known vesta cases (or match safes) were just one small portion of a far greater range of match holders. For any collector there are examples for all tastes and interests. However, as with many other collectables, there are many reproductions. Modern silver vesta cases are common; they look new and in some cases are marked simply 'sterling'. Some Japanese brass vesta cases have been copied. A poor hinge construction and obvious seams around the whole case are clear signs of a modern copy. As always, seek advice from trusted dealers and collectors.

As a dinner guest, I used to dread the conversation turning to antiques and collectables. When asked what I collected, my reply used to be 'match holders'. This was always followed by looks of indifference. I now say, 'what I collect was very commonly used throughout the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The objects were made in thousands of factories but some were also crafted by celebrated product designers. Such objects of everyday use were possibly the subject of more patents and registered designs than many other common items from that time. Made from a vast array of materials, the designs ranged from plain humble wooden boxes to fashion icons made by Fabergé'. That tends to command my dinner companion's devoted attention!

*Ian Spellerberg has long been interested in the social history of tinder boxes and match holders. Items illustrated come from several collections.*

