

# Distinctly Scottish Oil Wicks

by Dave Johnson

The mining of coal in Scotland goes back at least 900 years to the 12th century when monks at such places as Dunfermline, Culross, Edinburgh and Newbattle began digging coal in open cut mines and bell pits. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, Scottish coal was in demand by the salt-making industry. Salt distillation was especially well suited to the rich coal areas along the shores of the Forth, in the Lothian coal field and the rich coastal Ayrshire coal field. The Firth of Forth was the center of Scottish salt production, with numerous salt pans operating in Ayrshire, Lothians, Clackmannan and Fife. This salt production is reflected in such place names as Grangepans, Prestonpans, Kennetpans and others.



**(L) D.B. Rankin Maker Airdrie**  
**(R) Thos. Robertson Dalkeith**

As in all coal regions, when the surface deposits were mined out the mines had to be sunk deeper. As this occurred, water became more of a problem, as did the hoisting of mined materials. At first the small amounts of water encountered were carried to the surface on people's backs, followed by buckets raised and lowered by a windlass. As the depth increased these methods became less and less efficient and productive. The same is true of raising mined material from underground. At first the coal was hauled to the surface by women carrying baskets on their shoulders and backs, followed by buckets raised by man-powered and then horse-powered windlass. The advent of the steam engine for pumping and hoisting greatly increased the amount of water and mined material that could be raised to the surface from greater depths.

By 1720, the coal mines of Scotland were producing about 16% of the UK's total coal tonnage, the greatest proportion coming from the Lothian coal field, followed by Lanarkshire and then Ayrshire. The beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Scotland is recognized to be about 1770, at which time the lowlands of Scotland was developing cotton and textile mills, saltworks, breweries, candleworks, potteries, ironworks and mines other than coal. Coal is what fueled the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution's insatiable demand for iron led to a subsequent greater demand for coal to replace charcoal to fuel blast furnaces and to fuel steam boilers to run pumping engines and hoisting engines in mines and machinery in other burgeoning industries.



**(L) J. Anderson Dalkeith**  
**(R) A&J Grant Fauldhouse**

As in other coal mining regions, the coal miners of Scotland went through the same evolution of underground lighting, from torches to oil lamps and candles to safety lamps and carbide lamps to electric lamps. What developed in Scotland though was a style of oilwick cap lamp that is distinctly Scottish. Oilwick cap lamps that developed in the rest of the UK and the United States, the two largest users of this type of lamp, differed from the distinctly Scottish style. The typical oilwick cap lamp found in the UK is very small, just 1 3/4" to 2 1/4" tall to the top of the font lid. . The particular oilwick cap lamps being featured here have a much smaller diameter wick tube and correspondingly smaller wick than lamps in the U.S., as well as most other oilwicks produced in the UK. There is no equivalent of the driver's lamp found in the UK.



**(L) LD (Lamb & Dunn Ironmongers)**  
**(R) J. Melville Lochgelly**

The two types of oilwick designs found in the UK are 1) those with a spout that is attached to the font only at the base of the spout, with an open v-shaped space between the spout and the font (like most lamps found in the U.S.), and 2) those with an enclosed spout that connects to the font from top to bottom. It is this second style that is distinctly Scottish in origin. Interestingly enough the first patent for an oilwick cap lamp in the United States has a patent drawing (William Seybold Patent of 1862) of just such a lamp, however, this style never became popular in the U.S. This patent drawing is shown on the following page.

To date I have collected 54 different UK oilwick cap lamps, 14 of which are this particular Scottish style, and of which 11 are stamped with Scottish place names. The vast majority of the other 40 also have Scottish place names. In old period writings I have commonly found these little oilwick cap lamps referred to as "tallow lamps" or "tally lamps".

It has been my experience that the oilwicks produced in the UK are much more likely to be found with a spade hook than their American counterparts, 26 of my 54 examples have spade hooks. These spade hooks are

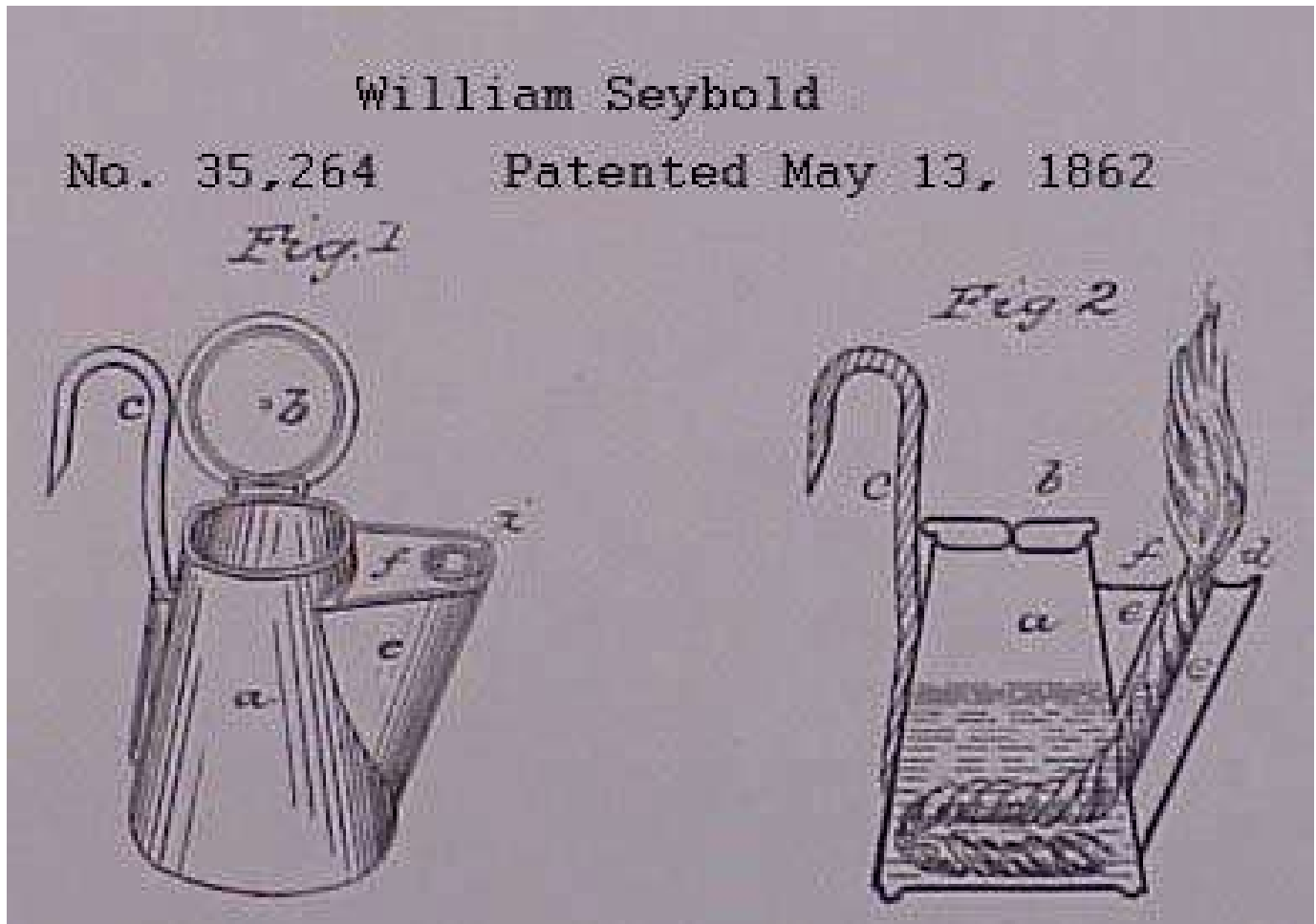
almost always tinned steel, even on lamps that are otherwise all brass, and are of a thinner gauge metal than spade hooks found in the U.S. Also worthy of note is the fact that oilwicks produced in the UK are more likely to have slightly domed lids than those produced in the U.S., 24 of my 54 examples have some degree of a domed lid. Six of the 54 have threaded lids (machined). The question in my mind is why this particular style of oilwick lamp was produced and used almost exclusively in Scotland?



**(L) J.H. Anderson 22 Victoria St. Edinburgh**  
**(R) W. Falconer & Son Dalkeith**



**(L) Unmarked, (R) Unmarked with brass spade hook.**



**William Seybold U.S. Patent drawing**