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THE GENTLEMEN OF THE LAMP

They Did Not Have Our Modern Lighting Problems—But They Had Others

LONG before America popularised "torch" music, there were, in New Zealand, torch-bearers who whistled at their work, when their teeth weren't chattering. They were the men who first saw the light. Some of them have passed on; some are now luminaries in much more comfortable occupations; and some have retired to the bowling green and the chess table. They were the lamp-lighters who prowled the streets of city and town long before there was a radio voice telling us to conserve our electricity—or else!

They did their jobs in various ways, according to the facilities available in their day. Some went round flicking on a lever; others had to carry an oil torch which turned the whiff of gas into a bright flame. Further back still were men who climbed on the back of a horse and lit a kerosene lamp.

Taking patriotic care to see that the electric heater was off and no lights left burning in the apartment house, a staff reporter of *The Listener* took a steam (not electric!) train to Petone the other day to interview two men who have, stored away in their memories, facts and figures about the old profession of lamp-lighting. One of them was O. Silbery, secretary to-day of the Petone and Lower Hutt Gas Board, but in his earlier days a member of the brotherhood of the ladder and the stick. The gasworks were opened in 1898 and among Mr. Silbery's earliest jobs for the concern was to see that once the gas was in the streets, it gave light. With a horse for transport, he made his rounds, turning the little lever at each post so that the pilot light would fire the mantle and show residents the way.

Pilot lights were efficient up to a point; in a high wind they blew out and chilled fingers had many a fumble with a box of matches. As a town grew, the rounds became longer, until the lamp-lighter took at least a couple of hours before he whistled "Last Post."

The Moon Brought Rest

It was a gruelling job in stormy weather, but there was a week or so in a month when the moon shone on the sleeping town and he could take a brief rest. Even then there was work to do, because that was the time for general inspection and repairs. The round began at 3.30 or 4 p.m. in winter and at 5.30 or 6 p.m. in summer. The lights were put out according to train time-tables. Not until the last train had arrived and travellers could reasonably be regarded as well on their way, did the final flicker die out. With the steady growth of Petone the number of lamps finally reached about 250. The greatest care was taken, to "zone" the areas so that there could be no doubling back on his tracks for the weary lamplighter.

The Listener was taken a trifle further back in lamplighting history by Walter

B. Gough, whose brother, the late Charles Gough, was one of the first Lower Hutt and Petone men to attend to the old kerosene street lamps, in 1889. The ancient lamps were square, with a large oil reservoir and needing a match for lighting every wick. Petone's population was then between 1700 and 2000.

Walter Gough started his lamplighting career 45 years ago. For two years be-



"He was a bit too keen"

fore that the gas fitters did the work, Mr. Gough was appointed official luminary in 1900. First of all he did the Hutt rounds and then was transferred to Petone. In those times experts in borough control were scarce, so he did some borough inspecting at the same time.

He Didn't "Wait For It"

"I had an old grey horse which soon learned the job until he knew it as well as I did," he told us. "Sometimes—quite often in fact—the pilot light had been blown out and I had to stand on the saddle to get the lamp going. As soon as the horse heard the door of the lamp snap shut, he moved on smartly, not 'waiting for it' as so many young men of to-day have learnt to do.

"He was just as anxious as I was to get the job done and 'hit the hay,' but on one occasion at least he was a bit too keen. I had developed a trick of sliding down the pole from the crossbar on to the saddle, and this night found that my horse was already making his way to the next post. I brushed past his tail nicely to land with a whale of a bump."

Mr. Gough conjured up a picture of thugs by night. During his rounds at the Hutt he was trotting steadily along the main street when three men stuck him up. "I didn't like their looks," he said. "One put his hand on the bridle and another came round to the side of the horse. Quickly I pulled a pair of pliers

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