Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

TINDER-PISTOL H307



Fire provides heat and light. Today both of these can be provided at the flick of a switch, but for centuries both creating a flame and sustaining it with fuel was a time-consuming and costly business. For centuries the daily lives of most people were governed by the presence of natural light - activity began at dawn and ceased at dusk. The tinder-pistol in this box illustrates one of the methods which people found to strike a light and drive away the darkness and the cold.

Before looking at the tinder pistol itself, it needs to be emphasised that most people would have used a tinder box to obtain a light - a much simpler contraption. A typical example can be seen above right. It consists of a container (1), a snuffer (2), a candlestick lid (3), a striker (4) and a flint-stone (5).

The container was used to hold combustible material, often rags of scorched linen, wood chips or dried moss. Such material was the tinder which, with the help of the striker and flint-stone, would be used to create a flame.

To do this the striker was held by inserting as many fingers as possible into the space in the striker. Holding the striker like a kind of knuckle-duster and the flint-stone firmly in the other hand, the striker was swept vigorously downwards across an edge of the stone. With a good piece of flint it was possible to get a spark, although it was often quite difficult to get it to land in the box.

With a bit of luck, the spark would drop into the box and the tinder would begin to smoulder. It could then be blown on to produce a small flame. A wooden or paper spill could be lit from this flame and used to light a candle, or the fire, or whatever task you needed a flame for. If you wanted to light a candle it could be fitted into the holder on top of the tinderbox's lid a clever arrangement that is quite common. The circular plate with a small handle is not a lid and was never intended to fit tightly over the box. It is a snuffer that would be dropped onto the smouldering tinder to put it out once a flame was no longer needed.

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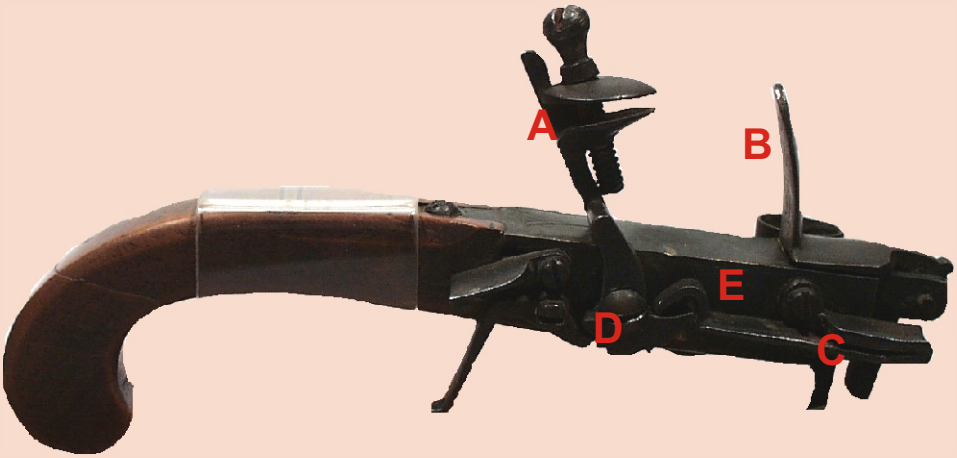

The tinder pistol strikes a light in the same way, although the process is slightly more mechanised. It consists of the firing mechanism of a flintlock gun, but without a barrel or bullets!

The tinder pistol in this box is missing one important element - the flint. As with a proper pistol, a piece of shaped flint would have been clenched between the two jaws of the firing cock (marked A, in the photograph of a similar pistol above). When the trigger was pulled the flint would spring forward and strike the curved metal frizzen (B). This would have two effects. Firstly sparks would be made and secondly the frizzen would flick forward exposing a small square area at the front (C) which would have been filled with tinder and maybe a pinch of gunpowder. The sparks would fall onto this material and - with luck! - a small flame would flicker into life. The owner would then have to grab a splint and light it before the flame sputtered out. The splint would be used to light a candle, held in the ring-holder attached to the side (D). The rectangular compartment which can be found immediately under the firing cock (E) would have been used to store spare tinder. This could be taken out using the small door in the side of the pistol.

This example probably dates from about 1800. Details of the maker are stamped on the metal plate on the top 'I. L. Ransier a Liège'. Liège is both a city and province in Belgium. Ransier could be a personal surname, but Ransy, a town (now a suburb) near Liège, was also sometimes referred to as Ransier. Probably the maker's initials are simply I.L. and he lived and worked in Ransy, near Liège.

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A tinder pistol would have been more expensive than a humble tinderbox. Some are even fancier than this example. The one shown on the left is made from very fine brasswork. However, an even more impressive specimen can be seen below right. This example combined the functions of alarm clock and tinderbox. The clock part could be wound up and sounded the quarter hours. When the pre-set alarm went off it released the trigger-held flint which sprang into action, igniting a priming of gunpowder, which in turn ignited a candle. The candle then popped up, ready lit, to provide light for bleary eyed owner!



Because tinder pistols looked very like proper pistols, they were sometimes used in robberies to frighten people. A trial at the Old Bailey on 4 December 1754 John Noon and Henry Goodwin were charged with the attempted robbery of James Flemming. Flemming testified that 'Noon pulled out a pistol tinder-box, and snapt it against my side, and punched me with it; I then upt with my cane, and struck him; then they both fell upon me, and we were all three upon the ground together : my hand was cut in the struggle, I believe with the tinder-box. Then Goodwin cried out, Murder him, shoot the dog! Then I cried out, Murder! Thieves!' noon and Goodwin were found guilty and sentenced to be transported to the colonies in America.

Sometimes, though, a tinder pistol could be used to scare off robbers. A newspaper of 1765 reported that 'Mr. Francis Thorowgood, of the Strand, returning from Kentish-Town, was stopped by two Footpads, a little beyond Mother Red-Cap's, who demanded his Money and Watch; but Mr. Thorowgood having a Pistol Tinder-Box in his Pocket, immediately pulled it out, and threatening to fire if they did not instantly sheer off, the Fellows, who imagined it to be a real Instrument of Death, took him at his Word, and scoured across the Field's with the utmost Precipitation.'