

Mr. Jorrocks's Vesta Cases

By Neil Shapiro

In 1843, Robert Surtees, a country squire, turned lawyer, turned writer, penned a novel *Handley Cross, or Mr. Jorrocks's Hunt* that chronicles the adventures of John Jorrocks, an eccentric grocer who became the Master of Fox Hounds. The novel has become known as the classic comic fox hunting book and the illustrations by John Leech, in the 1854 edition, have been recognized as one of the most delightful of the genre.

The novel's protagonist, Jorrocks is a Cockney grocer with a love for fox hunting. He is talkative, high spirited and somewhat uncouth. The book details Jorrocks's adventures and misadventures in the town of Handley Cross when he is asked to lead the hounds for the upcoming fox hunting season. Jorrocks lives for "unting" but knows he was chosen to lead the hounds because of his wealth rather than his social position.

The novel's comedy arises from his problems with losing his hounds, getting lost and encountering high fences. The end of the novel is somewhat sad as his friends have him committed to an insane asylum because he is using his wealth to finance his love of hunting and they want to protect him from losing his fortune. But one of the great pleasures of this book is the depiction of its events by the artist John Leech. Leech's illustrations closely follow the text in what appears to be a result of close collaboration between the artist and writer.

In 1889, Thomas Johnson, a noted London silversmith, created a series of sterling silver and enamel vesta cases, called match safes in the United States, that celebrated Surtees' characters and Leech's drawings. To date, we know of six different vesta cases and one cigarette case. One of these vesta cases is marked as made by Frederick Edmonds & Edward Johnson (partners of Thomas Johnson) in 1890 - the other five are all marked by Thomas Johnson, alone. All the vestas measure 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x $\frac{3}{8}$ " and the cigarette case is 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".



Mr. Jorrocks's lectures



The Convivial Meeting



On the front edge of five of the vests there is a quotation from Surtees' book. The vesta where the man is holding the fox reads, "the old customer", the man holding the whip reads, "Send my sec here", the one with Jorrock's holding a book reads, "Mr. Jorrock's and his Whipper-in", the vesta where Jorrock's is facing right reads, "The Handley Cross Fancy Ball", and the cigarette case and vesta with Jorrock's facing left reads, "Jorrock's

lectures on Unting”. The vesta with the image taken from the original woodcut of “The Convivial Meeting” does not have an engraved quotation.



The Old Customer

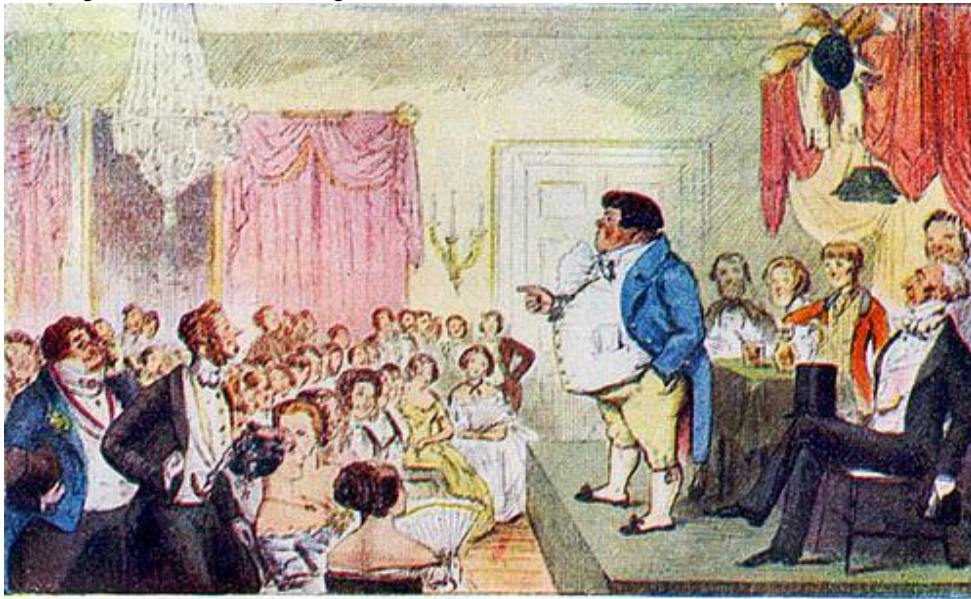


Send My Sec Here



Mr. Jorrock's And The Whipper-In

The original illustration for the cigarette case and vesta:



Mr. Jorrock's Lecture on "Unting."

Original illustration for "Mr. Jorrock's lectures on "unting"



Original illustration for "The Handley Cross Fancy Ball"

It is easy to see where Thomas Johnson received his inspiration for the “The Old Customer,” look at the Leech’s title page from the 1854 edition.





Original woodcut for "Jorrock's Lecturing"



Original woodcut for "Send my Sec"



Original woodcut for "Jorrock's and His Wipper-in"



Original woodcut for "The Old Customer"



Original woodcut for "The Convivial Meeting"

In the history of worldwide vesta manufacture, roughly 1835 -1920, very few vestas were made that feature literary designs or motifs. There are vestas that are souvenirs for theatrical plays and even musicals and light operas, but this set of vestas with interpretative portions of Leech's drawings stands alone as a series exclusively based on one novel.

The firm of Thomas Johnson was established in the early 1850s. Johnson is listed as a maker of fuzee boxes –an early form of vestas- by 1860. By circa 1875 his firm was known as Thomas Johnson & Sons and by circa 1878 the firm, now known as Johnson, Sons & Edmonds was still manufacturing all sorts of small silver items, including vestas. In 1898, the firm was transferred to Sampson Mordan & Co., Ltd. who also made vestas cases along with other silver items, most notably, propelling pencils.

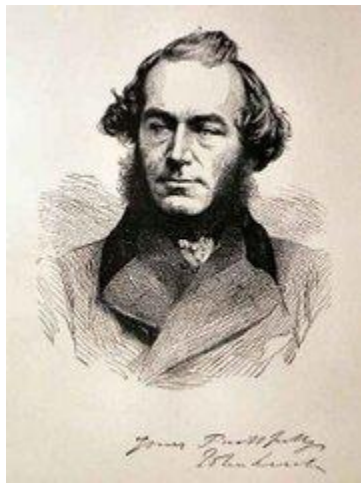
The question of who did the enameling on the Surtee's vestas is an interesting one. There is documentary evidence that at least some enameling on vestas and cigarette cases made by Sampson Mordan's company was done in Paris.* There is also documentary evidence that many enameled English vestas were sent to Birmingham's enamel painting shops before being returned to the silversmith for hallmarking and sale. Whether the enameling was done by Thomas Johnson's firm, a Birmingham enameling shop or in France is difficult to determine at this time. Edward Eldred, a Sampson Mordan scholar, and researcher as well as an expert on English enameling has told this writer that in his opinion the deep sky blue color of the Jorrock's vestas is not readily encountered on Mordan vestas and not much on vestas of anyone else.

But this much is certain; the enameling on the Jorrock's vestas is of a high quality and the care and artistry of the enameller in selecting certain portions of the original woodcuts

and color illustrations shows a high aesthetic sensibility and a fidelity to Leech's original drawings.

No one knows how many Jorrocks's vestas were made nor how many still are extant. The original five were found and purchased by a collector in London over several years. Recently, the collector purchased, at auction, another Jorrocks's vesta with a new image – "The Convivial Meeting". In the 1854 edition, Leech has 16 colored illustrations and 84 engraving on wood so the possibility that there are many more vestas with images of Jorrocks's remains a delightful possibility.

- In the Jan. 1, 1890, *The Tobacco Trade Review*, a summary of litigation between partners in the Mordan firm stated that the match boxes (vestas) were enameled with French designs – to which one of the partners objected on grounds of indelicacy – by a French enameling house.
(The author is indebted to Edward Eldred for this information)



Self portrait of John Leech