

Tunbridge Wells Journal

## Holdouts for Humble Bulb Defy a Government Phase-Out



Hazel Thompson for The New York Times

Jonathan Wright's shop sells lighting fixtures in Tunbridge Wells, where residents are resisting the switch to compact fluorescent bulbs.

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TUNBRIDGE WELLS, England — On a quaint lane called Camden Street, the sidewalk easel stands out for its apocalyptic tone: "100-WATT BULBS IN STOCK. (FOR HOW LONG WE DO NOT KNOW)"



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"Let some government official come in and tell me I can't sell these," Jonathan Wright, who has owned Classic Lighting for 40 years, said defiantly as he surveyed his warren of upscale light fixtures and shelves filled with neatly stacked bulbs. "I'll find them wherever I can get them and sell them for whatever they cost. People are buying in bulk because they want them."

Mr. Wright says that in the last two months he has sold 3,000 of the 100-watt bulbs — the traditional mainstay of British light fixtures — more than 30 times the usual. People are buying 10 at a time, the limit per customer, even though their price is nearly 50 percent higher than it was a year ago.

Mr. Wright's store is on the front lines of resistance to controversial global efforts to end the era of energy-gobbling incandescent light bulbs by phasing out their sale to encourage (or in Mr. Wright's view, force) people to turn to more efficient [compact fluorescents](#).

In Tunbridge Wells, the phase-out has brought howls of protest from people not normally prone to rebellion. This is, after all, the quintessential well-heeled English middle-class city — a place where Marks and Spencer is the epicenter of a high street dotted with bookstores and cafes, where people still wear Wellington boots and Conservatives win nearly every election.

Jenny Gale, 60, who said she had tried compact fluorescents while living in India, dislikes the new bulbs. "You can still find the old ones in stores that have some left, and for after that I'll be stockpiling," she said. "I'm not going to buy the new ones; I refuse. I hate the light."

Countries like Australia, Canada, the United States and the [European Union](#) nations have drafted varying plans to ban or restrict the sale of incandescent bulbs in the next few years. In the United States, the [Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007](#) effectively bans the sale of almost all incandescent bulbs by 2014, although last year Representative Michele Bachman, a Minnesota Republican, introduced the [Light Bulb Freedom of Choice Act](#), a bill that would overturn it.

Sales of the bulbs will be banned in the European Union as of 2012, but Britain has moved especially swiftly: the government asked retailers to stop selling 75- and 100-watt bulbs as of Jan. 1. Most complied, including large chain stores, transforming the humble light bulb into a precious commodity.

Some consumers have calmly adapted to the green new world of compact fluorescents.

"Seeing as that's the only ones we can buy now, I use them," said Katherine Allwood, a student. To get government credits for green initiatives, local electricity companies are even giving them out free of charge. But not everyone is taking.

"My mother tried them, and I said, 'Mother, my God, what have you done to your lights?' " said Pat Evans of South Godstone, northwest of here, who was out shopping.

"For now, I have a good supply of normal bulbs, but I suppose they won't last forever."

Incandescent light bulbs used to have a clean image, representing the wonders of modern convenience (as in the phrase "as easy as changing a light bulb"). Yet in an age of [global warming](#), the energy they consume — and waste — creates a public relations problem.

Lighting accounts for about 20 percent of global electricity use, or about 7 percent of global emissions. Incandescent bulbs, which dissipate the lion's share of their energy as useless heat, use 5 to 20 times more energy than the newer variants.

But the British have found themselves testing just how much people are willing to adjust long-held habits with the goal of greening the planet. (Like other European Union countries, Britain has promised to lower its emissions by 20 percent below 1990 levels by 2020.)

"Saving the planet is important, but it's not just about these bulbs," said Mr. Wright, the store owner. He said that compact fluorescent bulbs were fine for some fixtures that

produced diffuse lighting and that people should be educated to use them. (The bulbs can in theory screw into any fixture that takes an incandescent bulb.)

But their light is “awful” for many other lamps and fixtures, like reading lights and lighting near computers, since both types of compact fluorescents have a flicker, he said. Indeed, his customers have [a litany of complaints](#). The light is too dim, especially for reading and putting on makeup, they say; the bulbs, which are a bit longer than incandescents, protrude from small light shades; they take a long time to reach full brightness; they cannot be dimmed by switches; they contain mercury and therefore require special disposal.

Still, most stores here have abided by the government’s request, if only to cultivate a green image. (Compliance is technically voluntary for now, since the European Union does not end incandescent sales until 2012.) At the local branch of Tesco’s, Britain’s largest supermarket chain, there are no 75- or 100-watt incandescents, and the array of bulbs on display measures just 10 square feet or so. After all, if bulbs last six to 10 times as long, the display can be one-sixth the size. The compact fluorescent bulb considered equivalent to the 100-watt incandescent version sells for \$3.65; the old variant used to cost roughly \$1.

“People are switching because it’s hard to buy normal bulbs now,” said Mark Garnett, who works for an energy company. “They complain, but they do it.”

Many people say that the ban prompted them to do the right thing for the environment and that the inconvenience is minor. “I probably wouldn’t have made the switch otherwise — only certain types of people would have done it voluntarily — so it’s a good thing,” said Scott Evans, a surveyor here.

But for now, said Helen Nayak, 29, she and her husband are using compact fluorescents in their hallways only. They are saving “regular” bulbs for “rooms where we really want to see things,” she said.