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We print here the first response to Mike Simkins' call (in our last issue) for details of current magic lantern history in the making.

A THRILL IN THE DARK

Over the past four or five years my wife and I have presented our lantern shows throughout the North East of England. At first we were somewhat reluctant to present our Victorian entertainment in the video-age but our fears were unfounded for such tasteful delights as the rat swallower transcend all barriers of time and reach new and enthusiastic generations.

As collectors of course we have seen it all before but to the general public one can see the appreciation as they experience for the first time the darkened room, the smell of dust burning on hot mahogany, the click of glass, the flood of colour on the screen, the true Victorian thrill in the dark.

The show has its rewards for the presenters too, at one venue we even received payment for our services in the form of magic lantern slides and at the Science and Engineering Museum of Newcastle-upon-Tyne they even staged a huge lantern display from their own extensive collection to coincide with our visit there.

Then of course there are the members of the audience themselves. One very amusing story was told by an old lady who recalled as a child being allowed – as a birthday treat – to go to the lantern show being presented in the church hall by the Band of Hope. The slide show was the well-known *Jessica's First Prayer* and the emotional melodrama had been too much for the young girl who had sobbed all the way through the performance. When the tearful girl arrived home her mother was so furious that the birthday treat had turned sour that she went straight up to the village hall and severely reprimanded the lanternist for upsetting her daughter and demanded a refund to compensate for the spoiled birthday!

Authentic Victorian Magic Lantern Shows

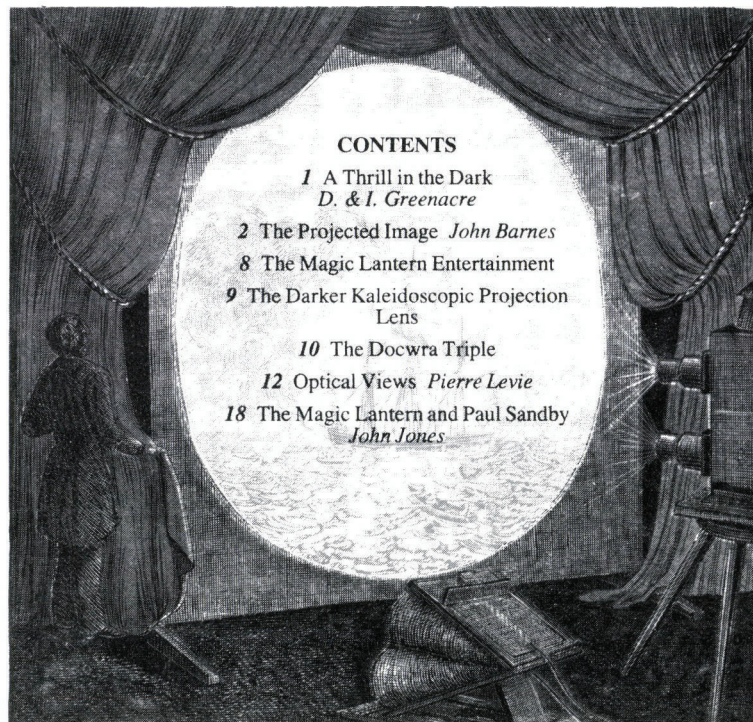
by

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During the course of our travels two memorable incidents occurred to us. The first at a Women's Institute venue where, included in the first half of our show, we had the set of slides *Mr & Mrs Brown and a mouse*. For the appearance of the mouse we have a small toy squeaker to add dramatic sound effects to the show.

After the interval the tea-lady returned from a back room to announce there *was* a mouse. The ladies in the audience offered their reassurance saying there was no mouse, it had merely been a toy squeaker. The lady replied (much to the dismay of all assembled) that there had *indeed* been a mouse as it had run over her foot in the back room. Later in the show I had of course only to squeak the squeaker once or twice in the darkness to cause all the audience to leap frantically on top of their seats!

On another occasion we found ourselves presenting our show one misty night to a local history society. Despite the dense fog we arrived in good time and made enquiries in the village as to where the hall was. We discovered that the meeting place was in the village church so we unloaded our large Reynolds and Branson lantern and carried it into the church. On our way back to the car to collect some more equipment we caused quite an unintentional drama. A lady who had been making her way through the graveyard suddenly saw my wife (who was dressed in her Victorian costume) mysteriously appear as a ghost out of the mist. The lady almost fainted on the spot and only after much reassurance could she be persuaded that we were indeed flesh and blood. Somehow since then we never doubted that our costumes looked authentic!



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