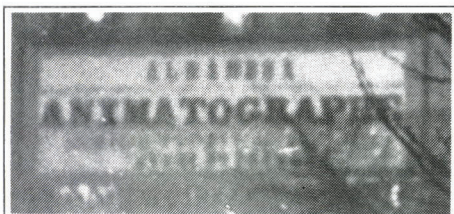


DATING A SLIDE

A TRIBUTE TO RON MORRIS

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I will always remember the advice of Ron Morris, when he was the Society's Research Officer, about the importance of dating slides and apparatus. I recently purchased a slide collection and with one particular slide I discovered just how valuable this advice was. One piece of research led to another, establishing that the image was of exceptional interest in the history of cinematography and photography.

The collection had belonged to a gentleman called William Wiggins, an active socialist around 1895–1910. He lived at 2 Spencer Road, Stoke Newington, and then at 7 Pellerin Road. He was also an active member of the Sunshine League, which organised outings for underprivileged children.

One of the slides shows his brother, Charles Wiggins, who played football for Woolwich Arsenal around 1898. I have not been able to discover from the Football League or Woolwich Arsenal, now Arsenal Football Club, whether he played for the First Team, but I am still hoping to be able to confirm this. There are also a dozen slides with a socialist theme, which Mr Wiggins used in his show to promote the Labour Party.

The slide I set out to date, however, was not one of these. Many of the slide boxes carry the label of Benetfink, 107–108 Cheapside, London. Thanks to John Barnes's compilation of *Manufacturers and Dealers* which appears in *Magic Images*, the 1990 Convention Book, it is possible to limit the dates for the collection to between 1867 and 1900.

The slide illustrated here contains a very clear clue. It shows the old Alhambra Theatre of Varieties, Leicester Square, with a prominent advertisement for the Animatographe. The screening of the Animatographe at the Alhambra was, in fact, a very important moment in cinema history. The first screening of motion picture films before a paying public – the Cinématographe Lumière – took place in Paris on 28 December 1895. Subsequently the Lumières brought the Cinématographe to London and opened at the Empire, Leicester Square on 9 March 1896. Meanwhile, Robert W.

Paul, an instrument maker of Hatton Garden, had perfected his own camera and projector, the Theatograph. The Alhambra, eager to rival the Empire, offered him a contract and Paul's motion pictures were launched there (now renamed the Animatographe) on 25 March 1896. The Animatographe remained on the bill for fifteen months: Paul's contract was terminated on 28 June 1897.

The slide may, however, have a further interest, relating to its original photographer. The photograph was taken at night and the street lighting is noticeably bright. Again *Magic Images* came to my assistance. James Fenton's article discusses the photographer Paul Martin (1864–1944). Martin used lantern slides, and in 1896 received a gold medal for twelve slides which he entered in the Pall Mall exhibition.

Among other interests, Martin was fascinated by the reflections of street lighting on wet pavements. This led him to night-time photography – not common in that period. Is it possible that my slide was one of those photographed by Martin? I turned to Martin's own book, *Victorian Snapshots*, in which he tells us:

'In my London by night subjects I generally found a spot where I could place my "Facile" camera on some handy railings like those of Leicester Square, on which I could strap it.'

Paul Martin goes on to say,

'One evening I was caught half way along the Embankment in a downpour of rain, and I could not help noticing the effects of the reflected lights on the pavement. I was always looking for new ideas so the next wet night I was on the Embankment with my "Facile" and my whole-plate tripod upon which I could rest it. The only people about were on the seats, London's outcasts, and I was fortunate enough to be able to

make a trial exposure of about ten minutes. When I developed the plate I found that the exposure was not far out, but the halation of the simple gas jets in the lamps was something tremendous, like Saturn's Rings, and all down the roadway were dozens of streamers produced by any vehicle carrying a lighted lamp. Although the lamps were lit only by a candle, both these faults had to be remedied. The remedy for the first was to use backed plates; and the second could only be obviated by covering up the lens when lights appeared in the distance and until they had passed me. This I did, and when I developed the plate I found the faults negligible and made a print. I took the print to the London and Provincial Photographic Association and the Editor and Sub Editor of the photogram were so impressed by it that they persuaded me to go out on a dozen or more wet nights and make a set of slides. I persevered and won the Royal Medal at the Royal Photographic Society with them, as well as placing eight of them for reproductions with the Autotype company in Oxford Street, on the royalty basis of 15%. When I visited the Royal Photographic Exhibition I was surprised to find two extra large enlargements of my London by Gaslight subjects made by the Autotype company.'

Does any member of the Society know what the twelve magic lantern slides were that won the gold medal? By the way, my slide is not an original slide but possibly part of the set of slides that could be bought around 1896–7.

Sources of Information

John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema*, David & Charles, 1976.

Magic Images, The Convention Book, published by The Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain, 1990. Articles by John Barnes and James Fenton FRPS.

Paul Martin, *Victorian Snapshots*, 1942.

