

ADVICE TO THE LANTERN SHOWMAN OF 2000

DON ATTLÉ

A hundred years ago, our predecessor, *The Optical and Magic Lantern Journal*, carried regular practical advice on showmanship for lanternists. We have not been able to follow this policy in any very consistent way, largely because the breed of full-time professional lanternists, the people who gave and took advice in the 1890s, hardly exists today.

Among the authentic 20th century heirs of the 19th century showmen however must be numbered Don and Marjorie

Attle, who gave more than 450 shows in the years between 1986 and 1998, when Marjorie's ill health finally obliged them to end their careers as lanternists. During this time they raised substantial funds for charity.

Don, now in his seventies, has offered to pass on some of the accumulated experience of those years for the benefit of the rest of us possibly younger and certainly less experienced show-folk. We would also like to think of these memories as a tribute to Marjorie, who, sadly, died last year.

Our shows were presented to a wide variety of audiences, including townswomen's guilds; women's institutes; museum, history and photographic societies; the National Trust; old people's clubs and so on. I hope that some of the things we learned in that time will be of help to anyone thinking of performing magic lantern shows.

THE LANTERN. Let me say at the beginning, that while there are advantages in having a biunial or, for the very fortunate, a triunial lantern, it is not essential. We and many others have given shows very successfully with a single lantern. Nor do you have to have slides costing a fortune. The secret of any successful lantern show is the Presenter, and a very able assistant.

First let us start with the lantern. You can choose between tinplate, Russian iron or wooden-bodied types. On the practical side, a wooden lantern is easier to use, as its sides do not get as hot as those on a metal one. It is assumed that the lantern you are to use is in good working order, and that the lens gives an acceptable picture; but if the appearance is poor, with dull brasswork etc., should it be restored? As a showman, my answer is, yes. When you give shows the appearance of your lantern is important, as many of the audience will want to take a close look. If it has nicely polished and lacquered brasswork and the rest is in good order, particularly a well-finished mahogany body, you will have given the audience the right impression even before the show.

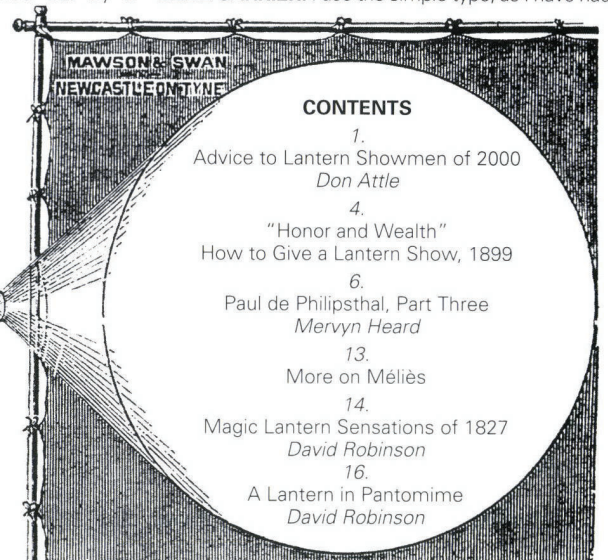
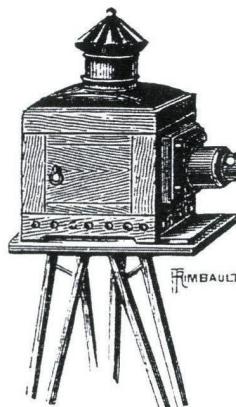
ILLUMINANT AND ELECTRICS. Having chosen your lantern you will need to obtain the right illuminant. A lot has been written about this. I

started out using the well-tried 275-watt, mains-voltage photoflood bulb, together with a domestic-type dimmer, but was disappointed with the lack of sharpness in the picture. However, I soon changed to a 24-volt, 150-watt quartz bulb, together with an appropriate transformer. The definition and brightness was greatly improved. Suitable transformers and dimmers are available from at least two members of the Society. As with all electrical work, any wiring should be carried out by a

competent electrician. Heat-resisting cable should be used where necessary, and all parts earthed where required. A circuit breaker used on the electrical lead and placed in the socket is a wise precaution.

Although it is not essential, I would recommend you use a heat filter between the bulb and the condenser. A curtain around the back of the lantern will prevent stray light from distracting the audience.

SLIDE CARRIER. I use the simple type, as I have had



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slides jam with the more elaborate Eclipse model. I make simple wooden carriers for all non-standard slides, such as the long wooden-frame type. Packing pieces should also be provided in the bottom of the carrier stage of the lantern, in order to align slides in the correct vertical position. Carriers should have stops fitted so that they can be located in the correct position in the lantern. Mark the slides in a distinctive way, so that they can easily be placed the correct way up in the lantern. This way you will avoid the embarrassment of the upside-down or back-to-front picture.

SCREEN. Use the largest you can transport – I would recommend one not less than 5 feet square – and made of screen material specially intended for the projection of slides. I made my own stand for the screen, but there are ready-made proprietary stands and screens on the market.

All lanternists will have their own idea of what is the best distance between the lantern and the screen, though it is largely decided by the focal length of the lens you are using. I started with a 6-inch focal length, which meant that in order to get a 6-foot picture, the lantern was placed approximately 12 feet from the screen – in fact about level with the front row of the audience. I liked this position as I felt I was talking directly to the audience and not to their backs, as I would have done if I had used a lens of greater focal length. This is a personal choice however, and experience will teach you the best position to suit your own style. If the distance from lantern to screen is very long, it may be necessary to use a bulb of higher wattage. At the end of this article is a table showing the distance between lantern and screen for lenses of different focal lengths. (This table was first published 120 years ago in Perken, Son, and Rayment's little manual *The Magic Lantern, Its Construction and Use*, but it is still very useful.)

Always check before starting a show that the lens is

width of the lantern, and of various thicknesses, can be used to lodge under it. Nothing is worse than trying to find books and the like to prop up the front of the lantern when you arrive at the venue.

At the rear of the lantern table I have a card table on which I place the slides in readiness. In order to make it easy to handle the slides during the show, I keep them in boxes. For normal-size glass slides, I made a box with internal dimensions 18 inches by 8 inches by 3 inches deep, with a divider lengthways down the centre. The slides are placed in one side of the box, and as they are used they are placed in the empty section. In this way I do not make the mistake of using the same slide twice. I fitted the box with a flat lid that is easily removed.

In the case of wooden-framed slides, the box is made of two identical halves hinged together along the long side. The internal dimensions of each section are 18 inches long by 7½ inches wide by 2 inches deep. For chromatropes, rackwork and slipping slides, the internal dimensions of the box are 18 inches long, 9 inches wide and 2 inches deep. When in use, the boxes are opened up and laid flat on the table. Slides from the full side are replaced in the empty side after being shown. Handles are fitted on the small ends of the boxes.

THE READING STAND. If you are to have readings in your show, you will need a suitable stand. At first, we used a portable music stand, but found it was not very steady, so I made a heavier version. For reading lights, we used the clip-on type used for illuminating books while reading. These are placed on either side of the stand, which is made of plywood. The 6-volt bulbs can be powered by batteries, or from the mains, using a suitable transformer. We found this kind of light adequate, without distracting the audience.

SELECTION OF SLIDES. How do you select your slides to ensure a good show? – and by show I mean an entertainment, not a lecture on a particular

Clement Nugent Jackson, and has a sad beginning but a happy ending. Marjorie was only satisfied with her rendering of this when she saw some member of the audience wiping away a tear.

For those who wish to use readings with slides but want to perform the shows on their own, or who perhaps do not like reading in public, there is the possibility of using pre-recordings on tape – a service now being provided by a member of the Society. As you are probably aware, complete sets of the most popular titles of Life Model sets are difficult and expensive to acquire. However, you will sometimes find incomplete sets more reasonably priced, and you can often adapt or re-invent your story to suit the slides. In our experience the sets with no more than 18 slides are the best to use. Happy endings seem to be preferred, so in some cases we adapted the stories to provide them.

Readings for sets of Life Model and lecture-series slides are now less difficult to obtain since the setting up of the Society's Slide Reading Library, which makes available many hundreds of readings.

Religious slides are normally reasonably priced, and we generally used about a dozen of these, not with any story but to show the high quality of many of them. From our collection we made up a set of 12 of the story of the Nativity, and this was always well received when shown during the Christmas period. With ten odd, hand-painted, wooden-framed slides plus two slipping sides we made a most popular set involving a shipwreck and sailors being rescued with the appearance of a Guardian Angel as the finale. Buy any odd slides if they are of good quality: with a little imagination you can make up your own stories to suit them.

Primus transfer sets can be obtained for reasonable prices and are very useful. Make sure they are of good quality and condition. We nearly always used a set in each show, and in the pantomime season included such favourite titles as Cinderella, Aladdin and Jack and the Beanstalk.

Black and white photographic slides can be interesting, particularly if they show the area in which you are presenting the show, or people in the dress of an earlier period. Comic sets, even when not well drawn, always seem popular. And Victorian hand-painted slides, some of which are real works of art, never cease to attract great admiration.

Long slides and those made for children's lanterns come in all sizes, but I would only use those of 2 inches and upwards in width. It is possible to make simple carriers for these. Care should be taken in handling them as they are normally not protected by a cover glass. Many people underestimate these commercially-issued transfer-printed slides, but the varied subjects can be very interesting.

While I do not advocate making your own lantern slides, it makes a good start to a show if you make a 'Welcome' slide with your name and the title of the show. This can be achieved by using transfer letters on a plain cover glass, by first making the design on paper and photocopying it onto transparent film, or by using computer imaging.

Always try to fit your selection of slides to the type of audience for whom you are performing: a group of ladies might not particularly appreciate slides on railway engines or some activity such as the iron industry.

MECHANICAL AND MOVING SLIDES. We always included chromatrope, ratchet, lever and slipping slides in our show. In the case of slipping slides, always inspect carefully when buying as the slipping effect is sometimes not very impressive. With ratchet slides, check that the gearing is in good order and that they revolve easily, as they are difficult and sometimes impossible to repair.

PRACTISING AND PRESENTING THE SHOW. Practice with your lantern at home, so that you can operate in the dark without fumbling about. Always try to keep the screen filled with a picture: a blank screen breaks the continuity of the show. Be critical with yourself, and aim to improve each show. After every show, Marjorie and I would discuss it, and



Don Attle with his late wife Marjorie (Photo reproduced with the permission of the West Sussex Gazette)

clean and that the condenser has not worked loose. If you are bringing the lantern in from the cold, make sure the condenser is warmed up slowly, as any sudden variation in temperature could cause cracking.

THE LANTERN STAND. The table or stand used for the lantern should be as rigid as possible. Nothing is worse than an unsteady table resulting in a shaky picture. The support should be about 4 feet in height with a top large enough to take the lantern without any overlap. The table can be fitted with means of adjusting the height of the lantern for correct positioning of the picture on the screen. Alternatively a separate stand can be used on top of the table, hinged at one end and with means of locking it in position at the other. Failing this, strips of wood the

subject. First, watch as many magic lantern shows as you can. Even if you are not able to attend the Society's meetings, this is now possible thanks to the video library. You will soon spot what makes a good show – but do not copy.

In the first instance, your show will be decided by the slides you already have. Start and end the show with the most colourful sets of slides you possess. If you have Life Model sets, always use them. This is where a good assistant is required, either to carry out the readings or to operate the lantern while you yourself read. This kind of slide was always well received. One of our most popular sets of slides, which we were regularly asked to repeat at subsequent bookings, was a life model set of 'The Doctor's Fee'. The original poem was written by

would alter any part that we thought necessary. If a set of slides did not seem to be very well received, we would try them again in a few more shows and if they still had the same effect, we would not use them again. It might be that such a set presented in a different way by another lanternist would be successful. Our show lasted between one and one and a half hours, and if possible we did not have an interval.

THE VENUE. Check well in advance that the venue can be properly darkened. This is important: we were sometimes told that the room was dark, only to find it fitted with light-coloured curtains that were useless for keeping out the light.

When booking the venue, check the car-parking facilities and ease of access. Make sure a parking space has been reserved for you close to the entrance and check if there are any stairs to climb, as this is no joke with heavy equipment.

FEES. What should you charge? I am sure that all lanternists have their own ideas on this, but for a start I suggest fixing a minimum charge which is suitable to you. If the show is in your own locality, the fee should take into account wear and tear of equipment, replacement of bulbs, insurance, use of car, etc. For shows outside your locality, add on to this a mileage charge for the journey to and from the venue. I use the figures from the table printed from time to time in the AA magazine.

We charged a fee which covered all expenses plus an extra which we gave to charity. When the show was being given to raise funds for a charity, normally we made no charge. We also tended to base our charge on the size of the organisation booking the show.

NAMING THE SHOW. Try to give your show a name, and be sure that you choose one that will not be confused with other lanternists' shows. Ours was called 'The World of the Magic Lantern'. After a time

you will be known as much by the name of your show as by your own name.

PUBLICITY. We never advertised, but we often had photographs and articles about us in the local papers – on one occasion almost a whole page. From these we not only received bookings, but often offers of lanterns and slides.

RECORDS. Keep a record of all the shows you perform, with details of date, time, fee, number in the audience, type of lantern used and details of all the slides shown. This will be important if you do a repeat show, and also useful in the future to see the sort of shows you were performing a year or two earlier.

INSURANCE. If you have your lanterns, slides and equipment insured, check that they are also covered when taken out of the house. Check your car insurance policy to ensure that it covers everything when you are carrying your magic lanterns, slides and equipment. I have this clause in writing from my insurance company.

Public liability Insurance is necessary to cover you for any possible claims against you for an injury caused by your lantern and equipment – for instance, someone tripping over an electric lead. It may be possible to add this to an existing policy, or you can take out a special one. In any case, the cost of this must be taken into account when deciding the fee you charge.

I must admit that I have comparatively little experience in this matter. Perhaps one of our members with the necessary expertise could write an article on what could be a very important issue.

DRESS. It is important to set the right atmosphere for the show. Marjorie wore a long black skirt and a Victorian-style white blouse; I wore black trousers, coloured waistcoat and shirt and black bow tie, though many variations of Victorian or Edwardian costume might be used. Many times members of

the audience have thanked us for making the effort and wearing the appropriate clothes. Jeans and T-shirts just don't seem quite the same.

SPARES. Make sure you take with you such things as spare bulbs, transformer etc., not forgetting a couple of torches, which you will always find very useful.

CHECKLIST. Make a list of all the items you need to take with you for the show, and always check it before setting out.

In conclusion, I hope that lanternists already working may pick up the odd tip or two from the things that we learned; but even more I hope that others may be encouraged to start their own show.

Remember that to be a magic lantern showman is something special. It is unlike any other form of entertainment, as the lantern and slides you are using are possibly 100 years old, and your audience in many cases will never have seen or perhaps even heard of a magic lantern show. I can assure all aspiring showmen that when you hear the applause at the end of the show and the comments you receive from the audience, it is an experience you will not forget. It is then that you know that the lantern can still weave its magic.

If any member would like further information or advice on any item in the article, please do not hesitate to contact me, as I remember that Marjorie and I would not have started to give shows had it not been for the great help and encouragement received from many other members of the Society – and which we continued to receive from that time on.

Write to me,
Don Attle, at 65 Mill Road Avenue, Angmering,
West Sussex BN16 4HX,
or call me on 01903 782 883.

DISC DIMENSIONS WITH OPTICAL LANTERN OBJECTIVES.

SUPPOSING we are called upon to use a magic lantern in a hall 25 feet in length, we first ascertain the site of disc desired, which we will suppose to be 10 feet. With an objective having a focus of 6 inches, how far from the screen must the lantern be placed in order to produce a 10-foot disc?

Here is the rule by which it can be ascertained:—

Let A = focus of objective.

„ B = diameter of slides.

„ C = diameter of disc.

„ D = distance between lantern and screen.

Multiply the diameter of the circle required (C) by the focus of the lens (A), and divide by the diameter of the slide (B).

$$\frac{C \times A}{B} = D = \frac{10 \times 6}{3} = 20 \text{ feet.}$$

It is thus seen that, in order to produce a 10ft. disc with a 6in. objective, the lantern must be placed 20ft. from the screen

On the other hand, we may possess several lenses of different foci, and it is necessary that the screen and the lantern must occupy certain positions, which we will suppose to be just 20ft. apart, and that the diameter of the disc must be 10ft. How are we to ascertain whether we must use a lens of 4, 5, 6, 7, or other number of inches in focus?

Multiply the distance between the lantern and the screen (D) by the size of opening of slide (B), and divide by the size of disc (C).

$$\frac{D \times B}{C} = A \text{ focus of lens} = \frac{20 \times 3}{10} = 6 \text{ in. focus.}$$

Again, we have a lens of 6in. focus, and intend that 20ft. shall intervene between the lantern and the screen, and wish to know what size of disc can be produced. In order to calculate this, it is necessary that we multiply the distance between the lantern and the screen (D) by the size of slide opening (B), and divide by the focus of the lens used (A), which gives us

$$\frac{D \times B}{A} = C \text{ size disc} = \frac{20 \times 3}{6} = 10 \text{ ft. dia. disc}$$

The following ready reference table has been computed by the foregoing rule, and by a glance it will show the relations between lantern and disc with object glasses of every focus from 4in. to 15in.

READY REFERENCE TABLE.

Distance between Lantern and Screen.	FOCUS OF LENS.											
	4in.		5in.		6in.		7in.		8in.		9in.	
	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.
10 feet.	7	6	6	0	5	0	4	3	3	9	3	4
11 "	8	3	6	7	5	6	4	9	4	2	3	8
12 "	9	0	7	2	6	0	5	2	4	6	4	0
13 "	9	9	7	10	6	6	5	7	4	11	4	4
14 "	10	6	8	5	7	0	6	0	5	3	4	8
15 "	11	3	9	0	7	6	6	5	5	8	5	0
20 "	15	0	12	0	10	0	8	7	7	6	6	8
25 "	18	9	15	0	12	6	10	9	9	4	8	4
30 "	22	6	18	0	15	0	12	10	11	3	10	0
35 "	26	3	21	0	17	6	15	0	13	1	11	8
40 "	30	0	24	0	20	0	17	2	15	0	13	4
45 "	33	9	27	0	22	6	19	3	16	10	15	0
50 "	37	6	30	0	25	0	21	5	18	9	16	8

Distance between Lantern and Screen.	FOCUS OF LENS.											
	10in.		11in.		12in.		13in.		14in.		15in.	
	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.
10 feet.	3	0	2	9	2	6	2	4	2	2	2	0
11 "	3	4	3	0	2	9	2	6	2	4	2	2
12 "	3	7	3	3	3	0	2	9	2	7	2	5
13 "	3	11	3	7	3	3	3	0	2	9	2	7
14 "	4	2	3	10	3	7	3	3	3	0	2	9
15 "	4	6	4	1	3	9	3	6	3	3	3	0
20 "	6	0	5	6	5	0	4	7	4	3	4	0
25 "	7	6	6	10	6	3	5	9	5	4	5	0
30 "	9	0	8	2	7	6	6	11	6	5	6	0
35 "	10	6	9	6	8	9	8	1	7	6	7	0
40 "	12	0	10	10	10	0	9	2	8	6	8	0
45 "	13	6	12	3	11	3	10	4	9	8	9	0
50 "	15	0	13	8	12	6	11	6	10	9	10	0

EXAMPLES.—An 8in. focus lens at a distance of 35ft. will give a disc of 13ft. dia. To produce a disc of 12ft. with a lens of 10in. focus, the lantern and screen must be separated by 40ft. To produce a disc of 15ft. at a distance of 45ft. will require a lens of 9in. focus.