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Graystone Bird

GRAYSTONE BIRD

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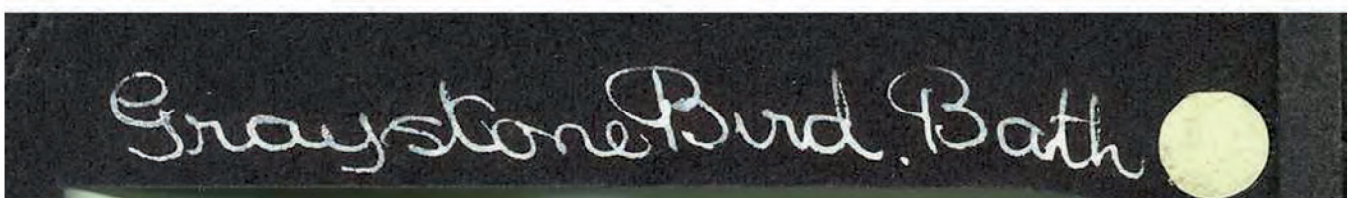
THE FINEST PHOTOGRAPHIC LANTERN SLIDES from the late Victorian and early Edwardian period are, in my opinion, those published by George Washington Wilson, James Valentine and Graystone Bird. Whilst Wilson and Valentine also published huge quantities of 'albumen' paper prints, Graystone focused almost exclusively on lantern slides.

He was born in 1862 in Frome, Somerset, and was christened Owen Graystone Bird. His father, Frederick Charles Bird, ran a successful photographic business in Frome and in 1866 opened a new studio at 38 Milson Street in Bath. Around the age of 15, Graystone was apprenticed to his father to learn the technicalities of photography and the skills necessary for him to inherit the family business. The 1881 census, when Graystone was 18 years old, shows him as an assistant photographer. Milson Street was a prestigious address and the business must have been very lucrative as, when Frederick retired, he moved to London and lived in a large house, with servants, until his death

in 1928. Although the core of the business was initially portrait photography, advertisements from the time indicate that by 1893 the Birds were producing lantern slides. They clearly had an eye for the latest market trends.

By 1896 Graystone had succeeded his father as the proprietor of the business. He was an astute businessman and sold his photographs direct to the public on the premises and by mail order and also to the retail trade. Newtons of London and Archers of Liverpool were both major customers. Graystone promoted his business by attending photographic exhibitions and entering competitions. Magazine articles (and his own advertisements) claim that he won over two hundred prizes for individual photographs. A number of his slides bear the inscription to testify to them being a gold, silver or bronze medal winner. He won international prizes in Vienna and Chicago. His work was recognised in America, Canada, Australia and Switzerland and there is evidence that he had agents in some of these countries.

Labels used by Bird





Whitby - Father and Son



Whitby Regatta at the Lifeboat House

Graystone's slides are instantly recognisable by their unique style and content. His rural genre series (taken in Castle Combe in 1906), child studies and hymn slides are very familiar to us, and his studies of fishermen in Whitby, the Isle of Man, Penzance and St Ives are particularly striking with their sharp detail, artistic poses and fine tone and contrast. Today, they form an important historical record of life in those communities. He also produced hunting, steeplechasing, nursery rhyme, Life Model and strip-cartoon slides, but few of these have survived.

The last known advertisement for Graystone Bird lantern slides was published in 1931. By that time, lantern slides in general and his format in particular, were distinctly old-fashioned and sales were probably insignificant compared to their Edwardian heyday. The business closed in 1939 and Graystone died in 1943.

Many of his child studies are of a rather cute, curly-haired boy, often to be seen in a mischievous pose. This was, in fact,

Graystone's son, Frederick Charles Graystone Bird (known as Gray) born in 1903. Gray continued in the family business for a while with his mother, then opened a studio in Guildford and had a very successful career as a press photographer. He died in 1988. His son, David Wadham Graystone Bird, Graystone's grandson, lives in Paulton near Bristol, and over the last twenty years has compiled a comprehensive history of the Bird family, including three generations of professional photographers. For me, Graystone Bird will always be one of England's finest turn-of-the-century photographers. I'm grateful to David for his help in writing this article.

Andrew GILL has been a member of the MLS since the beginning of Society. He is a professional lanternist giving performances at UK museums, festivals, Victorian events etc., and is particularly interested in social-history related, photographic slides. You can contact him at lanternist@ntlworld.com.

Children on the Beach



Gray Bird

