

MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY BIRMINGHAM & MIDLAND INSTITUTE, BIRMINGHAM 11 OCTOBER 2014

There were fifty-seven members present; six apologies.

For the MLS Autumn meeting we returned to the familiar surroundings of the BMI, founded in 1854 'for the Diffusion and Advancement of Science, Literature and Art amongst all Classes of Persons'.

The programme began with a piece of sleuthing work in the Agatha Christie tradition featuring an elegant hotel, a cast of eccentric characters and a central mystery (though admittedly no dead body!). MLS member John Selway set out to see what could be discovered about the spectacular triple lantern bearing the inscription 'The Servant of Light', which formed the centrepiece of our 2001 convention. Lester Smith had previously researched the matter in *Newsletter 66*, December 2001, page 9, and now brought the story up to date with some more recent investigations. Nevertheless, the central mysteries remain. Why did the hotelier Frederick Gordon, proprietor of the Gordon's hotel chain, commission such a costly lantern in the first place, and does the unusual domed chimney and inscription suggest some Masonic connection?



The Servant of Light, photo Lester Smith collection

The second presentation of the morning was given by projection artist Ross Ashton. Using original lantern slides of John Franklin's doomed 1845 expedition to trace the elusive Northwest Passage, Ross

had created a site-specific outdoor projection in Franklin's birthplace, the market town of Spilsby in Lincolnshire. This was a sensitive production, which managed to retain the integrity of these beautiful hand-painted slides while subjecting them to ingenious digital trickery of the highest order. He was joined by sound artist Karen Monid, who gave a fascinating insight into the creation of an appropriate sonic landscape for the performance using original folk songs, the sounds of nature and complex sound manipulation.



Ross Ashton & Karen Monid 'The Projection Studio'

The afternoon session was billed as a Halloween Special, with four presentations featuring all things Phantasmagorical. It began with Martin Gilbert and Lester Smith, who had each purchased parts of what was once the same collection of exceptional hand-painted Phantasmagoria-style slides in locations some twenty miles, and twenty years, apart. Using a



Phantasmagoria, Martin Gilbert & Lester Smith

mixture of digital and lantern projection, these slides were reunited for the first time and it was suggested that some parts of each collection were conceived as dissolvent pairs intended to combine together on the screen.

This was followed by a splendid scholarly presentation by Bernd Scholze – a brief taster for his long-awaited book on the origins of the magic lantern in Germany. On this occasion, Bernd concentrated on ghost lanterns; toy lanterns designed in such a way that the slides moved vertically through the gate. This was

a complex story, which required unpicking two distinct threads: the origins of toy lanterns in Germany by Rose and his successors, and attitudes to the Phantasmagoria in Enlightenment Germany. It is Bernd's contention, in contradiction to earlier writers on the subject, that these professional ghost showmen were unknown in Germany because of the fierce opposition to entertainments that appeared to promote superstitious beliefs.

Another highlight of the meeting was a 'Gallant Show' by three generations of the Gilbert family: Pat, Martin and Emily. This was a beautifully presented performance carefully choreographed to an eclectic soundtrack and featuring a breathtaking selection of 'Devilish Delights' from the Gilbert collection. We have seen marvellous presentations from the Gilberts before, but this really was a very special event.



three generations of Gilberts

The programme ended with an extract from Laurent Mannoni's DVD *Spectacle de Fantasmagorie*, recording an elaborate presentation he gave at the Louvre in 2011. Combining actors, musicians and original Phantasmagoria slides from a variety of private and public collections this was magic lantern entertainment on the grandest scale. The lanterns were operated by Laurent Mannoni and Laure Parchomenko, skilfully supplemented with digital projections.



Spectacle de Fantasmagorie

There has been some criticism at recent meetings concerning an overreliance on digital projection. The work of Ross Ashton, Laurent Mannoni and others reminds us that 'digital' and 'analogue' can exist happily together, and the meeting as a whole gave ample proof to the contention that each medium has its own strengths and that a happy balance can be struck between these two complementary forms of optical projection.

Jeremy Brooker

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