

PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS

THE MAGIC LANTERN LIFE OF JANET TAMBLIN

A profile by Jeremy Brooker – Part 1



1. Parker – Welcome and Adieu box



2. Maie Hicks (Janet's grandmother)



3. Great-aunt Wendy in 'Chu Chin Chow'

It all began on a sunny afternoon in the mid-1950s. Janet and Julia Tamblin had found an old black wooden box in the roof space over the garage of their New Forest home, next to a strange, rusty metal object with glass in it (an old epidiascope). They opened the lid of the box, which smelt 'old'. It contained several different boxes, one with a picture of an elephant on it (*The Elephant's Revenge*), together with flat pieces of wood with glass in the middle and handles sticking out of them (Fig. 1). The sisters shone a torch through the glass and Janet pushed a lever – a little girl in an old-fashioned red dress skipped up and down. The two sisters had found a magical box...

Over a decade later, when the Tamblin family moved back near London, Janet's grandmother, Maie Hicks (Fig. 2), also moved house. 'Would you like this darling?' she asked. 'It belonged to your great-grandfather Parker.' Maie handed the black box to Janet, who raised the lid on its familiar contents. She smelt the strange 'old' smell again. The 'magical box' had come home!

Janet came from a family of professional artists, dancers, theatre folk, engineers and designers (Fig. 3) and thus became interested in all of these things from a very early age. In her mid-teens she was torn between going to drama school or art school – both had offered her a place. Janet chose St Albans School of Art and trained in fine art, continuing with dance classes, verse speaking and horse-riding in her 'spare time'.

She left art school and sought work in central London. While teaching at Chelsea Pottery, Janet met Herbert Lank, the top private conservator of easel paintings in London and went to work for him in 1966. Herbert employed her for eight years and Janet was eternally grateful for his tolerance of her 'extramural' multi-arts activities.

The black box that contained 'magic lantern slides' was not forgotten. Maie had told Janet that her great-grandfather (not a professional lanternist) had given shows to the family (Fig. 5) with them when Maie was a child, using a 'magic lantern' which had apparently not survived. Janet was determined to find one.

The first magic lantern she bought was from an antique dealer in Victoria but, frustratingly, it turned out to be a photographic enlarger. It wasn't until she moved to Islington in the late 1960s that her quest took wings. Many happy Saturday mornings were spent in Camden Passage Market, where she found Beryl Vosburgh's tiny shop Jubilee and the veritable treasure trove within, all gently presided over by Beryl herself. One Saturday, Janet met Jeremy Brooker (who was still at school) in Jubilee and found a fellow voyager on the quest for magic lantern knowledge. Beryl, Janet and Jeremy

became firm friends and thought it would be a good idea to start a Magic Lantern Society...! Janet bought her first real magic lantern from Beryl, a very basic biunial and at last was able to project her great-grandfather's slides on the white wall of her basement flat. That was the moment she discovered that the magic lantern needed to be shared with the world. Janet and Jeremy were obsessed with the magic lantern. Jeremy also came from an interesting background, and his great-grandfather was Sir Benjamin Stone, the Victorian photographer. Jeremy's home in Highgate contained many wonders, including a zoetrope. Janet and Jeremy often went to Beryl's house for tea. Beryl was married to the well-known script writer, Dick Vosburgh, and they were always assured of a warm welcome in the Vosburgh family home, which was filled with amazing photographica, Victoriana – and people.



4. Janet with mural design



5. Great-grandfather Parker and family



6. Robinson Crusoe panorama – leaving shipwreck



7. Janet in newly painted cloak, in garden of her Islington flat



8. Mr Clark's tea party with Beryl and Matthew Vosburgh, Doug and Anita Lear, Janet and Jeremy



9. Mr Clark's Christmas card for 1973

Included among the many treasures Janet purchased from Beryl was a wonderful set of wood-mounted slides telling a humorous version of *Robinson Crusoe* (Fig. 6). The mounts were inscribed 'Edmund H. Wilkie, late of the Royal Polytechnic'. She also acquired a choreutoscope (for £4 10s) and eventually, her beloved biunial lantern 'Bertha', which has been in continuous use since the nineteenth century. One Saturday, Jeremy told Janet of an astonishing discovery – the local Finsbury Library had a number of nineteenth-century books, magazines and manuals on the magic lantern and (in those days!) they were available to take out on public loan. Naturally they both borrowed them and copied them. Janet and Jeremy joined forces and, sharing a combined love of both music and magical images, started to put shows together and experimented with different ways of presenting them. Janet created her mysterious performing persona – 'Madame Xenos Zoroaster – Strange Spirit of the Stars' – and a costume to go with it, including a leather cloak that she painted with the signs of the Zodiac (Fig. 7). (David Francis later told Janet that he knew of a mysterious and eccentric lady lanternist who had existed in the nineteenth century.)

Whilst living in Islington, Janet met Lester and Stephanie Smith and remembers going to a film with them. Mike Simkin and Terry Gilliam were also frequent visitors to Beryl's shop. Around that time, Beryl took Janet to see a magic lantern show given by Mike Simkin, which greatly inspired her, particularly the use of coloured dyes in a water tank for the magician's cauldron smoke effect. Janet also saw one of the rare 'silver screen' triunial lantern shows at the Science Museum, South Kensington, with more dissolving effect slides and projection techniques. Beryl introduced Janet and Jeremy to Mr Clark, a former lanternist with the Kodak Company. Mr Clark was a mine of information. They all enjoyed his shows and the accompanying 'teas' (Figs 8 and 9). They also met Anita and Doug Lear – before they had their narrowboat magic lantern theatre.

On Wednesday 13 December 1972, Janet bought four tea-chests of magic lantern slides at Sotheby's Belgravia, for £52. It took her two weeks to sort through them and wonderful treasures were found, including some Royal Polytechnic slides painted by Childe and Hill (Fig. 10), and a complete set of *Alice through the Looking Glass* by Henry Taunt. This find formed the basis of her performance collection.

Also around this time, Janet choreographed, designed and produced her second ballet *Actual Canary*, based on *Alice through the Looking Glass*, in which she also projected some of the Taunt slides.

In 1974, Herbert Lank disbanded his London studio in order to set up the Hamilton Kerr Institute in Cambridge and Janet moved to Bath to begin a new chapter in her life.

She made many new friends, including Derek Cooper, who was still a collector when they met. Derek asked Janet to project his slides for him – which she did – as he had never seen them projected. When he later decided to sell his collection and become a dealer in the great Western Antiques Centre, Bath, Janet was a frequent visitor to his stall (Fig. 11). It was there that Derek introduced her to Roger Orme, an agricultural fertiliser salesman who gave magic lantern shows in and around

10. One of the early Childe and Hill slides – Boadicea in her Chariot (after an engraving in Penny Magazine, 1838)



11. Derek Cooper at his stall





12. Janet and Jeremy – showtime

Bristol. Bath was also home to the Bath Arts Workshop, an anarchic group of young artists, performers, musicians and poets. Once a year they delighted in putting on an Alternative Bath Arts Festival. Janet and Jeremy happily joined in and gave magic lantern shows for 'The Last Festival' in 1974 in a variety of venues, including the Hat and Feather pub, tents, homes for the elderly and the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol (Fig. 12).

Another time, Janet travelled to Rotterdam (in the back of a van) with the Bath Arts Workshop, to perform at a Science Fiction Festival (in which the Dr Who at that time, Tom Baker, also appeared). The performance was improvised anarchy and in parts quite scary (for the performers!). Janet performed in the same show with the magic lantern and as a dancer (Fig. 13). She also participated in the grand finale during which the stage was covered with broken glass, fire eaters blew flames at random and performers threw raw offal at each other... Janet also gave a show at the ICA Gallery, The Mall, London.

One day, Janet received a visit from Roger Orme at her flat in Brockham End, Lansdown, Bath. Roger said he wanted to start a Magic Lantern Society. Janet explained that some years previously, Jeremy, Beryl and herself had had the same idea and that she was sure they could help.

Subsequently, the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain held its inaugural meeting at Corsham Court, Wiltshire, in October 1976. Janet and Jeremy gave the first magic lantern show ever given for the Society, on 'Bertha' (Figs 14 and 15).

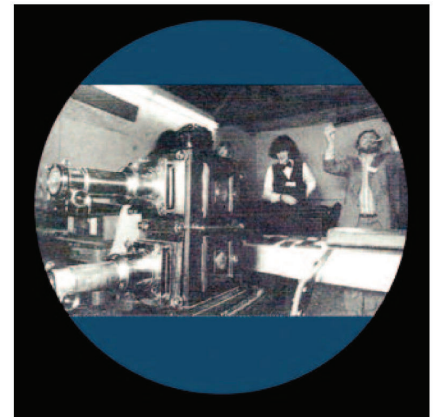
In June 1977, Janet was invited by George Speaight, the authority and writer on toy theatre, to join him in a performance at the Little Angel Marionette Theatre, Islington. Janet and Jeremy performed a lantern show, with George reading the script for the Wilkie Robinson Crusoe slides (Fig. 16). George also gave an excellent toy theatre performance of *The Miller and his Men*, complete with red and green fire plus explosive sound effects! The performance was completed by a mesmerising show given by George and his partner of their unique collection of Victorian *fantocinni* (trick) puppets.

Unbeknown to Janet, the instigator of the Puppet Centre Trust, Battersea, one Penny Francis, was in the audience. Somebody whose name had been mentioned already to Janet by Roger Orme had helped Penny to establish the Puppet Centre Trust. The name of that person was Mike Bartley ... but that, as they say, is another story.

TO BE CONTINUED



14. Beryl, Janet, Jeremy, 'Bertha' et al at the Inaugural meeting of the Magic Lantern Society



15. MLS inaugural meeting



13. Janet dancing in the Science Fiction Show



16. Robinson Crusoe panorama – raft reaching the island