



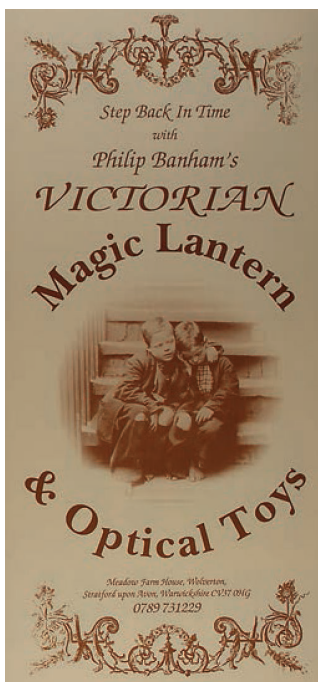
PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS PHILIP BANHAM

An interview profile by Jeremy Brooker

It all began when my father was the general secretary of a worldwide missionary society working in mining communities. To raise funds for the mission he showed magic lantern slides of the society's work. When my father was away on an overseas tour of mission stations, I had the opportunity to rummage around in the study. To my delight I discovered a box of lantern slides showing African women wearing minimal clothing. I used these to create a simple show, projected by a Russian iron lantern and smoky oil burner, for groups of my classmates who readily handed over their sixpences to watch. Word soon got around the all-boys school and these mini-presentations became popular, given the great secrecy about the female form at that age.

My next encounter with the magic lantern was many years later as a postgraduate student in 1973 at Manchester University. My final project was based on the use of visual aids to assist in adult literacy in northern industrial towns. Searching the numerous antiques shops along the Stockport Road for relevant examples, I discovered some boxes of excellent photographic slides. Although they were not directly related to my research, they were too tempting to leave behind – and so a passion for the magic lantern began.

When I moved to rural Warwickshire, I soon found that there was a demand for presentations using my brass and mahogany lantern to provide Victorian entertainment to a range of audiences in village halls and Women's Institute meetings. The programmes were based on a simple formula including a mixture of local views and history, photographs of rural agriculture, some comic slipping slides interspersed with two or three story sets complete with the original readings. As many lantern performers will be aware it is extremely difficult for the lantern operator to simultaneously give the readings. The solution was resolved by members of the family becoming involved. When my wife Rosemary was not available our three school-aged daughters – Annette, Lucille and Emily – were press-ganged into service.



In the mid-1970s, I spent many lunchtimes with Mike Simkin, who was generous in sharing his considerable knowledge of pre-cinema entertainment. It was at this time that the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain was established. Some considered that the Society should only be open to researchers and practising lantern showmen, and that applicants should submit a CV before they were allowed to join. However, it was decided that membership should be open to all, which was subsequently thought to be the right decision.

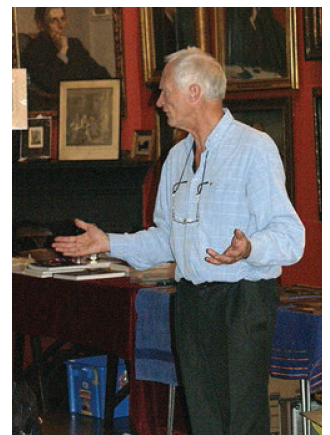
Ron Morris, a prominent figure in adult education, was appointed Chairman. I attended the second meeting held at the Stanhope Institute in London, where a small band of magic lantern enthusiasts forged the beginnings of the successful MLS of today. These early meetings had a significant impact on me and played a key role in shaping my subsequent career as a magic lantern showman and lecturer.



Successive chairmen of the Magic Lantern Society, alongside Lester Smith, have been skilful in encouraging members to contribute to the ongoing programmes. One such challenge came when I was invited to give the evening show at the end of the AGM at the Architectural Association in 1985. The performance involved the whole Banham family with integrated music, readings and slide sequences. Rosemary played an antique portable organ, Emily the clarinet and Annette and Lucille were narrators. I remember how apprehensive we all were. This was eased by the calming influence and practical technical support of Dennis Crompton and Tony Dugdale (who produced a welcome hip flask!).

Living close to Stratford-upon-Avon gave a number of opportunities for collaboration with professional actors and musicians. I developed a number of theatre performances with these professionals for organisations including the RNLI and Cancer Research. There was some initial doubt as to whether the shows would have widespread audience appeal. However, they were excited to receive a consistently positive response from a range of younger audiences.

Events changed for me in 1991 when a serious heart attack forced early retirement from my post in the local education department. Fortunately this coincided with the advent of National Curriculum Stage 2 History, which required primary school teachers to interpret primary Victorian sources. Many teachers only had general training in this subject, and needed further guidance, so every West Midlands





local education authority organised a number of in-service training days. I contributed to each of these days, with a demonstration of how Victorian photographs and magic lantern slides could provide valuable information.

This work with teachers led to a part-time teaching post at Warwick University, where I used photographic magic lantern slides as a major source in the Victorian social history module of the bachelor's degree in history. Following this, another opportunity presented itself as a regular lecturer for the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies. Subjects included *350 Years of English Painting on Glass through the Magic Lantern*, *Phantasmagoria through the Magic Lantern* and *The Search for Sir John Franklin*.

Rosemary has shared my interest in the magic lantern and latterly we have given many joint presentations in theatres, at arts festivals and to a wide variety of specialist societies. This has taken us to a really interesting range of venues including stately homes, castles and converted cinemas.



The life of a magic lantern showman and lecturer can be somewhat challenging at times. For example, on one occasion we battled through heavy snow on country roads in the middle of winter only to find on arrival that the lecture has been cancelled due to the weather! On another occasion, I realised my total inadequacy when addressing the Royal Society of Chemistry at their annual conference while showing and attempting to explain the workings of a range of early limelight apparatus. At the conclusion I recall a Japanese professor of organic chemistry remarked: 'I know the English sense of humour: tell me you were actually joking when you showed the Lawson Ether Saturator – that would be very dangerous, yes?'

Although magic lantern performances were a real passion for me, I took the tough decision to retire at a point when things were still going well. Working with the magic lantern has provided lots of

opportunities that Rosemary and I both enjoyed immensely. It was an exciting time, during which we met many well-informed and delightful audiences. One of the few downsides was the hours spent travelling on congested British motorways.

When thinking of advice to offer other members of the Society who are considering giving lantern presentations, I cannot offer a single, clear answer. They each have their own style – and the way they give presentations depends greatly on their personality and confidence as a performer. However, the following may provide some useful pointers:

- Be well prepared and test all the equipment in advance.
- Consider who is in the audience and what is going to keep them awake and interested.
- Be well organised – lay out the slides in order on a large table that is positioned close to the lantern, so you can find the next slide in the dark.
- Focus the lantern before the audience arrives.
- Be relaxed – if the presenter is relaxed then the audience will be as well.
- If possible do not use notes and when speaking by the side of the lantern make sure your voice can be heard by everyone.
- If you use readings, make sure the reader has a good clear voice. You may need to reduce the length of the original reading, as most modern audiences only have a limited attention span. It is rare for one person to be able to both read and project the slides.
- Share your passion and enthusiasm with the audience!

I am very keen to pass on my enthusiasm for the magic lantern to the next generation of showpeople. I very much hope that the Society will continue to attract new talent to keep the tradition alive. I feel strongly that the projecting lantern and vast archives of slides should be used not only to recreate pre-cinema historic entertainment but also to do so in new creative ways. Many new members demonstrate how to use artistic skills to create dynamic new slides. I strongly believe that the future of the magic lantern and its possible uses is ever expanding.

I am pleased to say that although I have retired from presenting lantern shows some of the slides from my collection are now being used by Jordi Pujades, my son-in-law. In September 2016 his Magic Lantern Circus Show was included in the programme of the Terrassa



Modernista – the major autumn arts festival in Barcelona. He was able to combine his skills as a professional circus artist with the slides to produce an attractive family entertainment, presenting multiple shows during the course of the festival. There were long queues waiting for admission, with over 2,000 people enjoying his performances – and the event proved a great success in passing the baton on to the next generation.

