

THE ROYAL PANOPTICON OF SCIENCE AND ARTS FURTHER INSIGHTS

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I thoroughly enjoyed Bill Barnes' article on the Victorian Exhibition Halls of London in the last edition of *The Magic Lantern*¹. This gave us a brief overview of a dozen 'palaces of entertainment' where most likely the magic lantern loomed large – and where, towards the end of the century, the cinema quickly took over in those still standing. He did mention that the magic lantern was probably used at the Panopticon but as yet had not investigated any further. I hope he does not mind me adding more to his story.

The giant dome as shown in Bill's engraving was deemed too heavy to build and the external image here is how it looked when finished (drawn and painted by Thomas H. Shepherd in 1855).

The 'Royal Panopticon of Science and Arts' in Leicester Square was the brainchild of Edward Marmaduke Clarke, its managing director, as Bill points out. It was given a Royal Charter in 1850 and Mr Clarke started a company with £80,000 capital raised by selling £10 shares in this new venue. He believed that, after the Great Exhibition of 1851, some of the amazing industrial, technical and artistic pieces might be looking for a new home. After considerable delay, the Panopticon finally opened in March 1853.

Mr Clarke's own double lantern named the 'Biscenascope' along with many other optical effects he had designed were used there, and a transparent screen thirty-two feet wide x thirty-six feet high was mounted behind a curtain above the ornamental grille over the organ (a piece of tracing paper has been overlaid on the engraving to show its approximate position). This immense organ consisting of 4004 pipes was commissioned from Messrs Hill & Co². The organ keyboard below could seat three players.

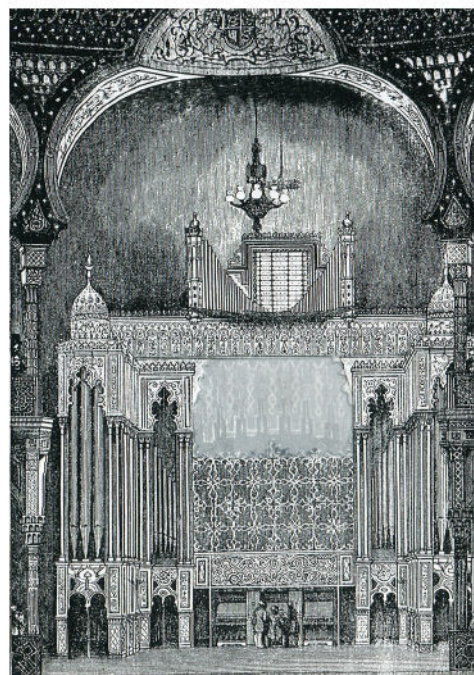
The Biscenascope was mounted behind the organ which had to be very cleverly designed so that the lantern could project through it onto the transparent screen. Mr Clarke used the organ in conjunction with moving panoramas, an optical diorama and dissolving views. There were performances from Handel's seranata *Acis and Galatea* with the singers out of sight, as well as a series of tableaux and the *Panorama of Verona*^{3,4}. Many of the views were painted by Carpenter and Westley and Thomas Clare⁵.

At first, the lighting for the lanterns was too dim but this was considerably improved by installing Duboscq's Electric Light Apparatus, the single light source being sufficient for both lanterns⁶.

New views were added in late 1855 – *The Fall of Sebastopol*⁷ and *The Crimean War*. Shortly after this a descriptive lecture on *Russian Life* by Mr Leicester Buckingham appears on the programme – on alternate nights he would perform *A Ramble through Venice* illustrated by dioramic views of the principal points of interest⁸. These possibly provided a relief from the horrors of war. By January 1856 he had added two amusing narratives for Christmas holiday visitors – *Tales of Whittington and His Cat and Puss in Boots*⁹. Another of his lectures was *Manners and Customs of the Chinese*, illustrated by glass slides. Many of the illuminated images were described as 'works of art'.

After this short period of activity, the Panopticon closed on 11 May 1857 as a result of the serious decline in public interest. The entire contents – too many to mention here – were sold by auction. The great organ was sold to St Paul's Cathedral. Fortunately the Royal Polytechnic Institute's popularity, despite having many similar attractions, did not wane and it carried on unabated until it finally closed in 1881 having opened in 1838.

Postscript: The chromatrope was one of the 'spectacular illusions' regularly shown at the Panopticon and I know that several members of the Magic Lantern Society have original slides bearing Edward Marmaduke Clarke's name. Without doubt they came from the Royal Panopticon of Science and Arts.



REFERENCES

1. *The Magic Lantern*, 2017, No. 10, p8
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4. *The Art Journal*, July 1854
5. *The Musical World*, 1854
6. *The Picture Times*, 6 October 1855
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9. *The Art Journal*, February 1856