

# SUMMER MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

ASTOR THEATRE, DEAL  
SATURDAY 29 JULY 2017

Mary Ann Auckland

At the end of July the Magic Lantern Society met for a day 'beside the seaside' in Deal, Kent. The venue was the Astor Community Theatre, a gem built in 1906 and donated to the town by the Astor family after WWII. However, another major attraction is that **Joss Marsh** and **David Francis** are soon to open their Kent Museum of the Moving



Image (Kent MOMI) on the same street – and we had a sneak preview.

The twin themes for the day were the seaside and Latin America. Despite the international programme at the Convention, Latin America was not represented. **Ian Christie's** talk aimed to fill some of this gap. Images of Latin America had appeared in the first public panoramas from the 1790s, then later in dioramas from 1823 and even Wyld's Great Globe in Leicester Square during the 1850s. A popular subject in London, the Egyptian Hall held an exhibition on 'Modern Mexico' in 1824. Peep media also featured Latin American subjects.



Mexico exhibition in Egyptian Hall

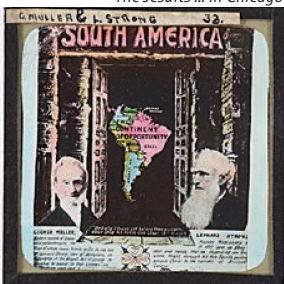
on Brazil. Authentic early images of Brazil are rare because the Portuguese tried to keep the country a secret from the outside world for over 150 years – with remarkable success. Among the very few



Simulation of the Rio de Janeiro panorama

discussed whether missionaries had brought magic lanterns. He had found no proof of the Jesuits bringing lanterns to Latin America and discovered that the one well-known image often used in evidence is,

The Jesuits ... in Chicago



in fact, from a seminary in Chicago. He concluded that the Christian Brothers, some of whose slides are now in Manchester's Rylands Library, and protestant missionaries were generally more active in using lanterns, with David Livingstone in Africa standing way above any others in this.

W. B. Grubb was an Anglican missionary in Paraguay in the late nineteenth century who started using the lantern and reported that local audiences were fascinated but highly critical of style and content. The programmes of the Teatro Sao Pedro in Porto Alegre, Brazil, show that it hosted lantern shows as entertainment well into the twentieth century, despite the arrival of cinema. The famous Burton Holmes travelogue lectures also featured slides of Latin America.

Next **Joss Marsh** and **David Francis** set out the background and strategy of their Kent MOMI. From a talking point in 1995, to serious planning in 2008 and the acquisition of a suitable building – albeit needing a substantial amount of work – in 2011, this was the story of dedication to a dream. Along with the cinema collection, they have around 20,000 magic lantern slides, over 100 lanterns and other items. The museum space will balance exhibition, research, administration and storage, with the exhibitions changing regularly and generally following conceptual rather than chronological themes.



They aim to attract multiple communities of interest – from local and international to academic and the many people curious but less knowledgeable about pre-cinema and cinema. The three opening exhibitions will feature the Ealing films and Ealing film posters, history of shadows (or '35,000 years to catch a shadow', an alternative history of representation and what they call 'technologies of the shadow' such as silhouettes, photographs and moving images) and the Royal Polytechnic Institution. Coming up will be Jean Renoir and an exhibition to mark the end of WWI in late 2018. So far they have not applied for funding and most of the hard work has been done by Joss, David, their handyman (or 'building manager') Stuart and volunteers. **Roger Evans**, a leading light in the final category, told us about cataloguing the collection using CollectiveAccess software, with slides of the Mississippi steamboats Natchez and Robert E. Lee by Joseph Boggs Beale as an example. The Museum plans to open later this year – so we are not printing any images yet – but members were invited to look round. As those present will testify this is a diamond of a museum and we applaud Joss and David for what they have achieved.



Set up in the Museum was **Robert Poulter** and his miniature New Model Theatre giving performances of his special Latin-American themed piece *Down at the Palm Court Something Stirred!* This involved a 'chase' sequence, with participants including a band, some desperados, church commissioners and vampires, ending up at the





H.G. Wells

Robert W. Paul

Palm Court amid dancers, waiters, an orchestra and guests all up to strange and entertaining antics.

Back in the Astor Theatre, a joint presentation by **Jeremy Brooker, Ian Christie** and **Stephen Herbert** was based on a little-known connection between the great cinema pioneer Robert W. Paul (1869–1943) and the author H. G. Wells (1866–1946). Following the success of H. G. Wells's first novel *The Time Machine* in 1895, Paul met Wells and devised a highly imaginative multisensory machine inspired by the novel that was the subject of a provisional patent (19984) on 24 October 1895. Inside the proposed machine the backgrounds were essentially magic lantern projections with the moving figures on film, giving people the sensation of being in different places and times. The machine was never built. This episode is described in Terry Ramsaye's book *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* published in 1926.

After a brief introduction, Ian began the session by looking in depth at Robert Paul who was educated at Finsbury Technical College and, aged 23, set up business as a technical instrument maker in Hatton Garden. In 1894 he was asked to make replicas of Edison's Kinetoscope and, discovering it was not patented outside the USA, also made some for himself. Now needing film, he collaborated with Birt Acres to devise an ingenious camera, although the partnership with Acres was short-lived. Paul filmed Queen Victoria's 1897 Diamond Jubilee and made many films – we saw some rare examples.

Stephen picked up on Paul's kinetoscope parlour business. At one time at least six London parlours, with both Paul and Edison machines, were in operation but only one or two Robert Paul examples survive. Stephen doubted they were ever economically

patent a kinora for home movies and the mutoscope limped on into the twentieth century.

Jeremy had been asked by a TV company to visualise what images might have been used in the Paul/Wells machine. He first explained how he went about fulfilling this unusual commission. Then, with passages from the novel read by **Mo Heard** and recorded musical accompaniment, his specially created lantern slides were shown publicly for the very first time. We saw the playful Eloi, the fearsome Morloch, dinosaurs and even the destruction of the world.

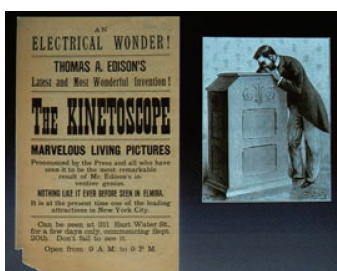
Next **Nick Hiley** explored the role of children – 'little angels' – in magic lantern sets from around the 1880s to 1910. While we are used to stories of particularly good children overcoming all adversities, in that era they were far more likely to die. Nick seemed to sympathise with Oscar Wilde's view of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* that: 'One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.' In Nick's set of *Wee Davy*, the eponymous hero takes twenty of the forty-two slides to pass away. The sentiment of the popular hymn 'Jesus wants me for a sunbeam' seemed to prevail. However with 140 in every thousand children dying (current rate: 4) and your chances of still having parents if you managed to reach the age of 25 at 88 per cent, the world was very different.

Nick treated us to the heart-rending tales of *Jessie's Last Request*, *Mother's Last Words* and *The Telegram* – and sang charmingly to a 1907 song set (music 1906) *Is There Any Room in Heaven for a Little Girl Like Me?* The last set bucked the trend with a slightly annoying little girl living through the entire duration of *Beautiful Grandmama*.

Finally the 'bring and show' section produced some real delights. On the seaside theme, we saw the 1902 Coronation Naval Review; **Alexia Lazou** had made a lantern slide-based film to Suede's *By the Sea*; **Aileen Butler** had five seaside locations to identify (none were); **Lester Smith** showed some Ally Sloper slides; and **Jeremy** and **Carolyn** took us back to Deal in 1907 with a circus procession. On the Latin American theme, **Ian** showed us Rio by night and **Lester** an early twentieth-century set of Mexico including the Combat of Flowers in Leon. **Nick Hiley** produced a 'missing link' – some rare title slides once used to introduce early Mitchell & Kenyon films. All cinemas before WW1 had facilities for both movie and magic lantern projection. Then, after a full and thoroughly enjoyable day, members packed up their buckets and spades and headed home.



Eloi



viable with each customer/viewer requiring a machine. Putting pictures on a screen with one machine serving around 200 people seems to make more business sense. However, the Lumières did

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