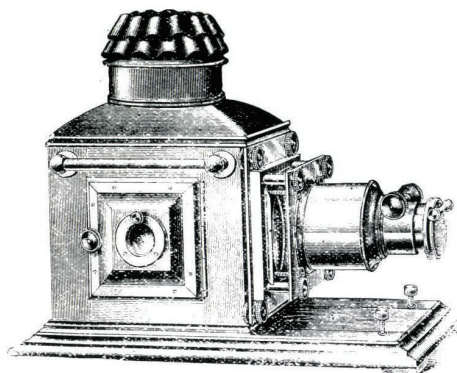


Recollections of an Old Time Lanternist

A talk by Maurice Butler given before The Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain on October 15th, 1977



I have been associated with the magic lantern for as long as I can remember, because my father had a small mahogany-bodied lantern with an objective lens of six inch focus and a blow-through jet for limelight. He used coal gas from the house supply and oxygen from his own cylinder. This lantern was used only in our home in London, and I must have seen the limelight in action. I have no recollection of this, however, because by the time I was old enough to be interested in the working of a magic lantern the oxygen cylinder was empty. At that time the upright incandescent mantle for coal gas was readily available, so we decided to try one in our lantern.

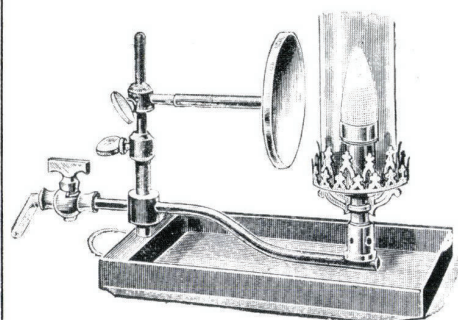
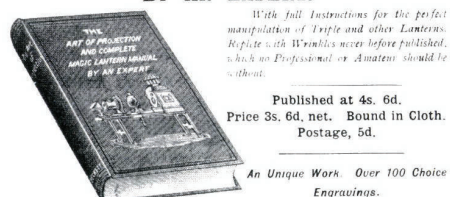


Fig. 75.—Incandescent Gas Fitting.

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My father had a number of pithy sayings and one of them was 'A good lanternist never shows a white sheet'. He was a member of the London Polytechnic, and had seen the magnificent lantern shows given by that body; but my knowledge of lantern operation was derived solely from his instruction and from studying the numerous text-books on the magic lantern which he possessed.

In 1920 we moved to Watford, taking with us our lantern and two sets of black and white slides, one of 'Rome', with a reading designed to accompany a similar, but differently numbered, set; and the other of 'The Zoo', including a picture of the bear at the top of his pole in the old bear pit. We soon acquired other small sets of slides, such as 'Lamps and Lanterns of the Past' and 'Old Manners and Customs'.

My father and I began by showing our slides, for charitable purposes, in rooms and small halls, using acetylene as the illuminant. We had a fitting with

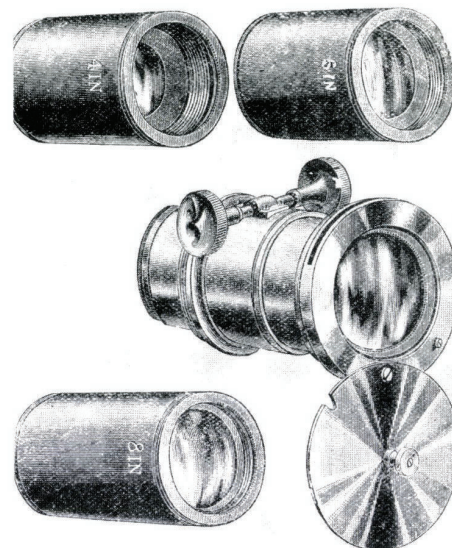


Fig. 20.—Set of Objective Lenses.

FIRST IN 1897. FIRST IN 1898.

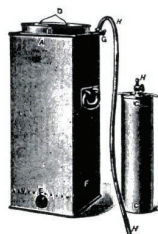
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MOSS'S Patent Lantern Jet.

four burners, supplied from a small generator formerly used by my father for the headlight on his motor cycle. This work served to emphasise the limitations of our lantern; and we realised that there was a need in our district for operators with a lantern which could be used satisfactorily in any hall or club room of reasonable size, irrespective of the means by which the premises were artificially lighted. In 1922 we purchased a reconditioned second-hand Russian iron lantern, with three objective lenses of eight inch, ten inch and twelve inch focus.

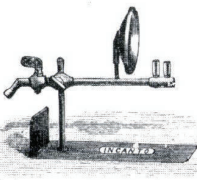


Fig. 80.

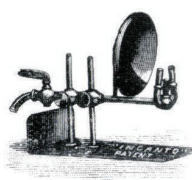


Fig. 81.

Figs. 80 and 81.—Acetylene Gas Burners.

I cannot remember that we ever failed those whom we had promised to help. We were able to obtain the equipment we desired; our automobiles always fulfilled their functions; the weather was never too bad; and we kept our health and strength, although we were both in business during the day and our time was limited. It did not occur to us to make any charge for our services; we were only too anxious to obtain the pleasure of operating our lantern.

For a screen we used a linen sheet a few inches larger than six feet square, with carpet binding all round the edge, on the back, and fitted with a brass hook for a cord at each corner. We inserted two screw eyes in some convenient woodwork, above the screen and further apart than its width; and with two other screw eyes in the floor we were able to secure a firm and taut screen.

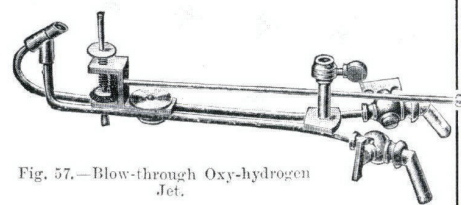


Fig. 57.—Blow-through Oxy-hydrogen Jet.

We had three forms of illuminant: acetylene, coal gas and oxygen, and the electric arc. A friend gave us a larger acetylene generator, which had been used to supply the lights on a motor car; and for coal gas and oxygen we began by using my father's blow-through jet. In place of a lime we had a pastille, which was a small cylinder of hard white material, about one inch long and half-an-inch in diameter. The flame played upon one end of the pastille; and as this pastille did not disintegrate under heat, or absorb water from the air as lime does, it lasted for many lantern shows. Later we obtained what was known as an injector jet, which gave a much hotter flame than the blow-through jet and so provided a more brilliant light. It required a greater pressure of oxygen, however; so we had one of our Beard's regulators altered to deliver

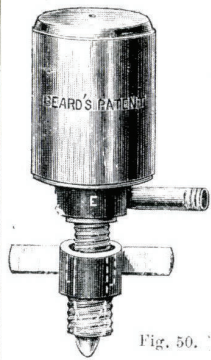


Fig. 50.

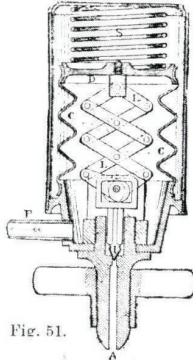


Fig. 51.

Figs. 50 and 51.—Beard's Regulator.

the oxygen at a pressure of fifteen pounds per square inch in place of the usual five pounds.

With regard to the electric arc, we tried a small arc lamp and a resistance; but this did not give us sufficient illumination. We had, of course, no time to take a supply of electricity from a main switch-board, so we usually inserted an adaptor into the nearest lampholder. Bearing in mind that an arc lamp requires only fifty volts for its successful operation, we sought, and secured, a second-hand transformer to supply this voltage. Using this in conjunction with our resistance we were able to feed twelve amperes of current to the arc, while taking only just over three amperes from the lampholder. This gave us an excellent light. As our activities increased we found that even our objective lens of twelve inch focus gave too large a picture in the larger halls, so we bought one of sixteen inch focus.

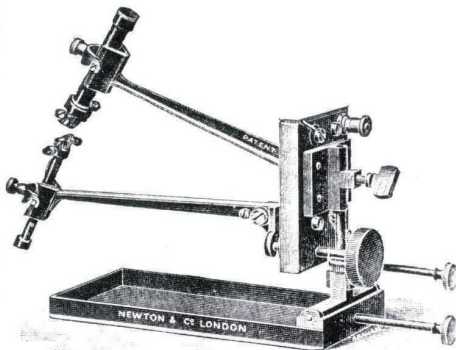


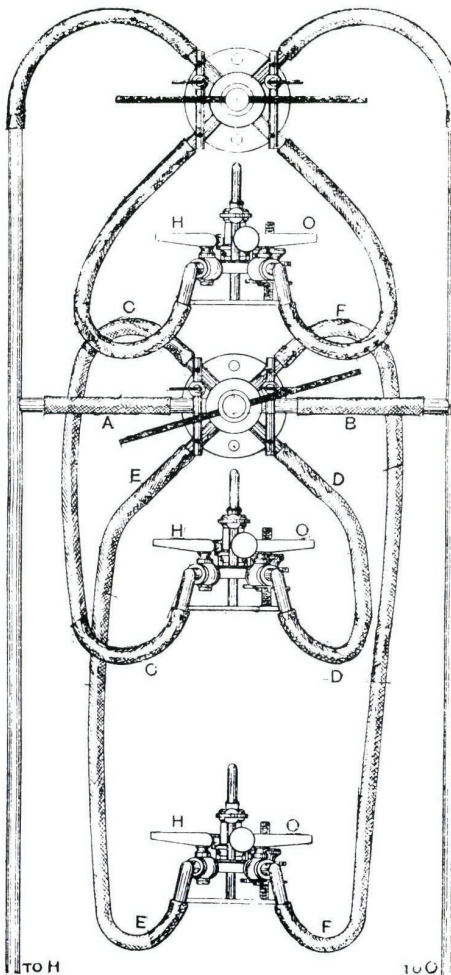
FIG. 235

Our work was mostly operating for other lecturers; but we borrowed a set of slides from the then London and North Western Railway. We did not consider these slides to be of sufficient interest, however; so we built up our own set on 'Old Travelling'. In those days the sets on sale on any particular subject were not always exactly the same; and in any case individual slides from any set could be purchased; so that it was quite easy to assemble a set of slides entirely to one's own ideas. In our lectures I was the speaker, while my father operated the lantern. At a later date we borrowed a set of slides from the Royal National Life-boat Institution; but here again we were not quite happy with them. So we had our own set made, partly from the Institution's own negatives and partly from photographs which we selected from their Journals. When we gave this lecture, the organisers frequently took a collection on behalf of the Institution.

We made certain, of course, that our own slides were so carefully spotted that they could be put into the slide carrier without hesitation; but when we were operating for other lecturers we checked every slide. It did this by placing a sheet of plain white paper on the table behind the lantern, and throwing light upon it by drawing back the curtain at the rear

of the lantern. I then handed each slide to my father in the correct position.

This brings me to our first professional engagement. In 1923 we were asked by a firm of slide manufacturers to operate for a lecture on Decimal Coinage, in a hall behind one of the old churches in the City of London. The slides were mainly of coins from countries in which this form of currency was used; and all went well until we came to a slide depicting a small velvet cushion, with four or five circular depressions in it, each containing a coin. After examining the slide I gave it to my father as usual. It had been on the screen for only a few seconds when one of the audience called out 'That slide is in sideways'. Confident that we were right, but always ready to oblige, we altered the slide; only to be told by someone else that the slide was still not in the correct position. We tried again, provoking some further discussion; until another member of the audience discovered that the coins were not all the same way up.



One small Mission Hall in which we frequently operated was lighted by coal gas, which we used with a cylinder of oxygen. At the conclusion of each of these shows my father, when removing the rubber tubing from the gas fitting, used to pinch each end of it, to confine the coal gas; then he held one end of the tube behind some unsuspecting old lady and blew down the other end.

At a lecture on the British Empire — it was the British Empire in those days — we were astounded by the number of slides handed to us by the lecturer. He talked on and on, until we had to stop him about half-way through to change our arc lamp carbons. Then he continued his discourse; at intervals some of the audience left; but at last he came to the end of his slides and had to stop.

In our lantern work we were very fortunate in not having any competitor or rival. As far as we knew, there was no amateur in our district with a lantern and equipment comparable with our own; and the only professional lanternist in the area was an elderly man who had given up this work except to oblige one or two old friends. We were on the best of terms with him; and he passed on to us as 'sub-contractors' a number of engagements which he had accepted. In this way we operated at, and were paid for, two lectures for the Watford Medical Society; four Good Friday services at the Parish Church of Leavesden; and several lectures at a Private School for Girls near Watford.

In 1930 we were asked to operate for a series of lantern services in Lent and on Good Friday, in the Parish Church of Watford. We pointed out to the vicar that at the time these services would commence it would not be dark, so that the windows ought to be covered. He replied that as the services progressed the pictures on the screen would gradually become clearer; and that in his opinion this would be an advantage. The screen would obviously have to be put up in the chancel arch; and as we always aimed at placing our lantern as far back as possible, we decided to operate from the front row of the gallery. Under these circumstances, however, even with our objective lens of sixteen inch focus, the picture would have been larger than the screen which we normally used. My father was a builder and decorator, and had a number of dust sheets, so we decided to use one of them for our screen in the church. Our difficulty was, that the centre of this sheet bore my father's name and address; so when we sent it to the laundry to be washed, we asked them to bleach out the offending inscription. They made quite a good job of this; but as we knew where the wording had been, we were just able to trace it.

My father and I claimed that our lantern was the only one provided with a safety curtain. A slide manufacturer made for us an asbestos-coloured slide, with the words 'Safety Curtain' across it in red. We closed the shutter in front of the objective lens, put this slide in the carrier, and then opened the shutter; reversing the process when we took the slide out of the carrier. By this means the audience were not able to detect any movement of the slide.