

SCENE ON BOARD

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Our centrefold for this issue of the journal features part of Doug and Anita Lear's collection of magic lanterns - a mouth watering display we feel sure you will agree.

Since 1976 the Lears have been operating the only professional magic lantern theatre in the World. Originally only occupying half of the English narrowboat on which they live the show has been successful enough to expand onto two boats, increasing the seating capacity from the original twelve to the present thirty. One boat, the Phantasmagoria, is the theatre with the other being the Lear's permanent home, shared with their two children Elwyn and Merlin, and the faithful watchdog Newton.

On a recent damp December morning your editorial team made its way to Little Venice, the London Mecca for narrowboats, where we photographed and interviewed and were enchanted by the display of goodies unearthed for us to supplement the Lears normal day to day permanently working collection of lantern equipment.

It was fourteen years ago that the collection began to be formed when Doug and Anita were students of art and graphic design in Manchester. During his final year of studies Doug was preparing a thesis on nineteenth century photography. Even then the price of old cameras was prohibitive for a student's pocket, but as he toured the junk shops of the Midlands he began to find that the mahogany and brass of the magic lantern was increasingly more attractive to him and his wallet than the cameras. At the same time Anita was collecting Victorian cut-out toys, which were eventually sold when the two decided to buy their first narrow boat and to establish the theatre. On moving to London Doug continued to expand the collection whilst teaching and working in advertising. It was at this point, Doug told us, that he noticed regional differences in lantern collecting for the first time. Whereas in Manchester he was used to finding lanterns by Archer, Chadwick and other midlands manufacturers, now down South he mostly found equipment by the London fraternity of Newton, Hughes and the others. For the first two years of their life on the boat Doug and Anita led the life of water gypsies, nomads travelling the length and breadth of the canal system, giving nightly performances in all the major towns on the network. However now that their elder son is of school age the pattern of life has settled and the boats are permanently moored in London except for the months of the long school holidays when the family sets off on tour as before.

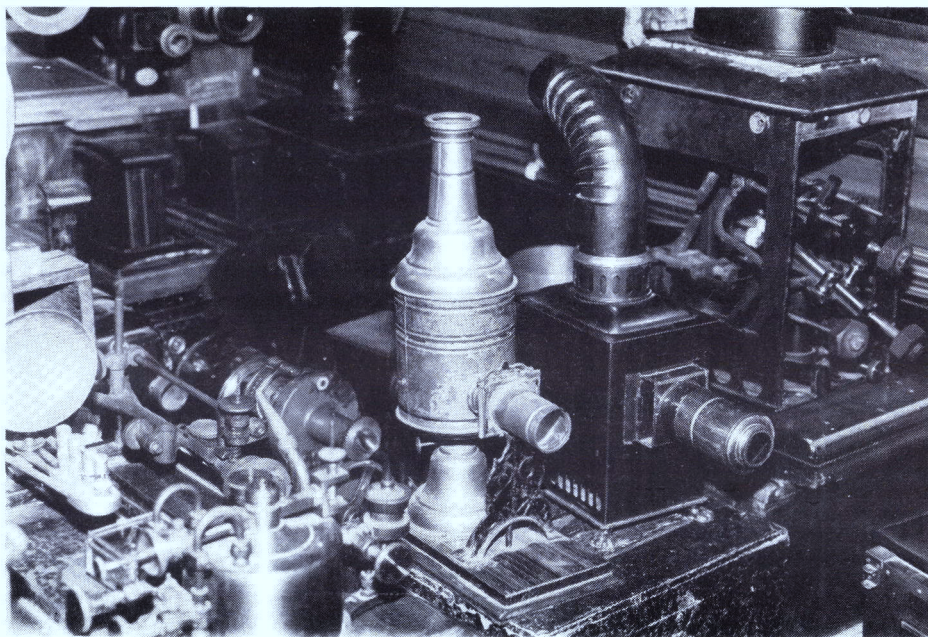
The show itself is terrific. A mind blowing demonstration of the almost lost art of magic lantern projection. For two hours every night the Lears transport you back to those balmy High Victorian days...view dissolves into view...day becomes night...summer changes to winter...the calm seas boil and bubble as the lightning crackles and the thunder rolls...all leading and building up to a rip roaring kaleidoscopic crescendo of chromotrope turning and returning, twisting and tinting and the whole show ends with a hand cranked run through of the Lumiere Brothers very first films and the demise of the magic lantern.

The collection itself is summarised in these pages, although we cannot do justice to the slides so haven't even tried. Truly we think this the most amazing of our centrefolds so far.



ABOVE
THE MUSIC CENTRE. The Lear's show features Doug on the music during the first half with Anita operating the lanterns. During the second half its all hands to the lanterns with the sounds being provided by one of the many cassettes shown in the picture. As can be seen the first half sounds include harmonium, cymbals, drums, bells and whistles.

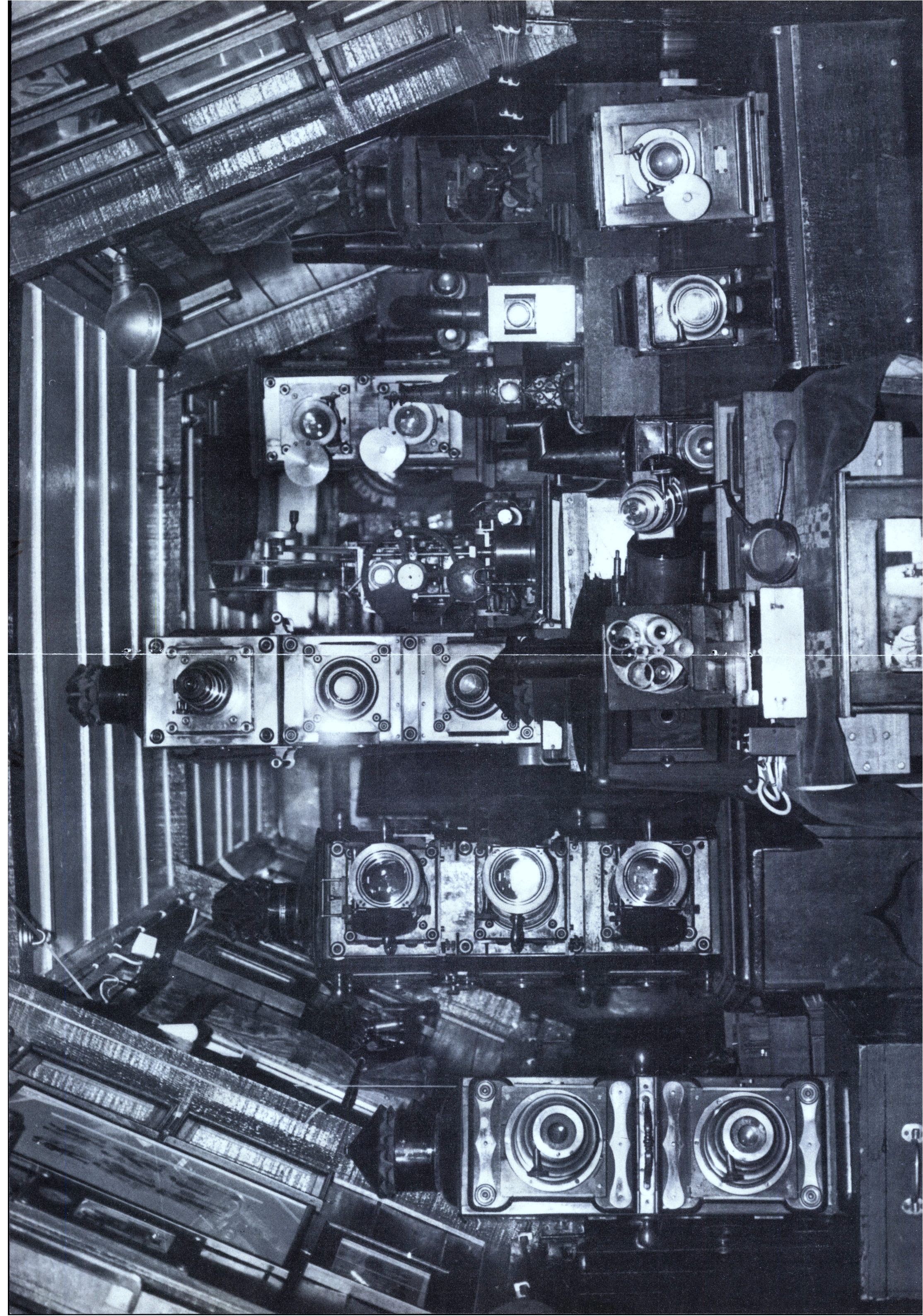
BELOW, foreground from left to right
Gwyer four jet acetylene burner, Ether Saturator, Two Ernst Plank toy lanterns, Carbon Arc illuminant.

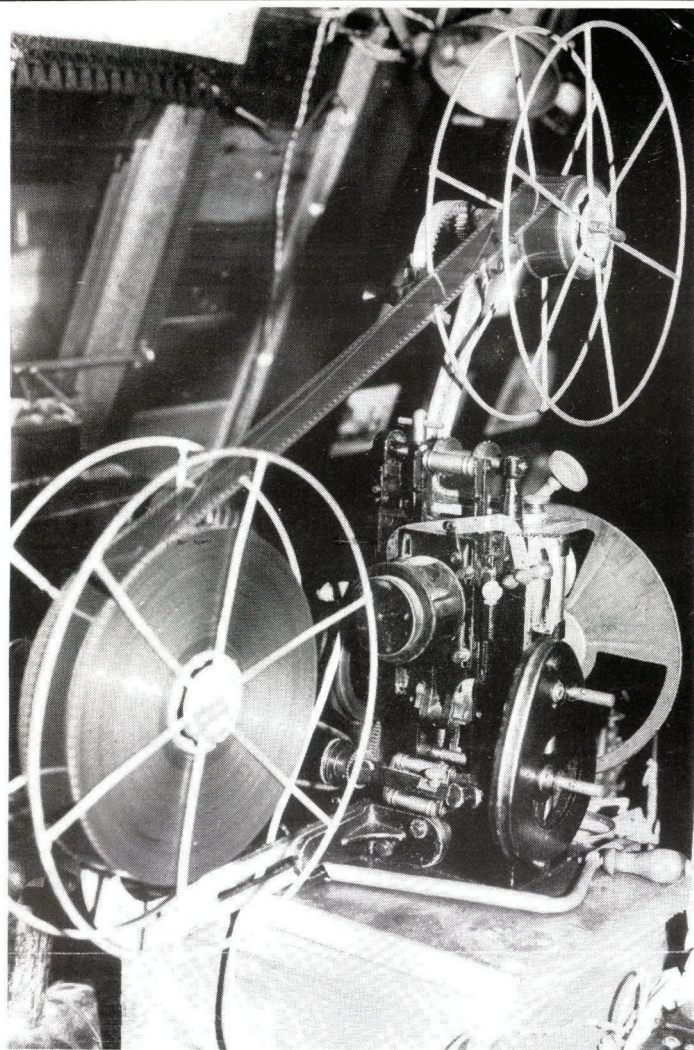


OVERLEAF, from left to right

Rear : Bi-unial by Yardley, Tri-unial by Steward, Tri-unial by Newton, the Molliere Cinematograph, unnamed Bi-unial with matching French lenses.

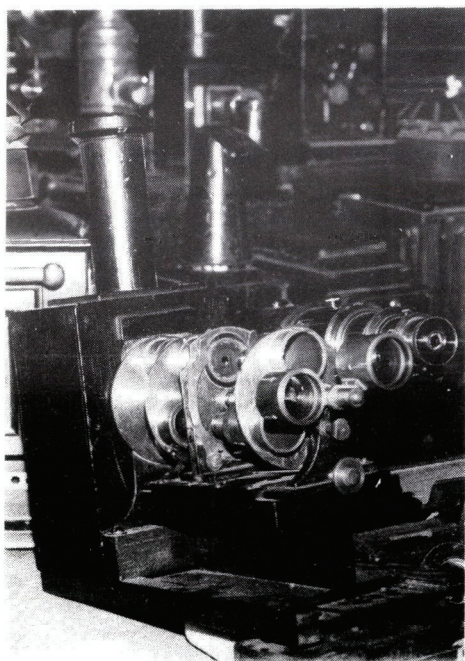
Front : Greenwoods prototype projecting microscope, the extraordinary Newton's vacuum slide minus its mahogany casing. The brass bound double glazed section is filled with water through the tube on the top right. The pressure is then pumped up by squeezing the rubber bulb at the bottom right. The two silhouette witches sandwiched between the two sheets of glass then start to dance! Above the pump slide an elbow polariscope fitted with Nicol prism and mounted on an Optimus mahogany and brass lantern. An eighteenth century Phantasmagoria type lantern with bulls eye lens. Ernst Plank childrens lantern. Scott of the Antarctic's lantern (presented by his son Sir Peter Scott) A demonstration lantern with removable leather bellows.



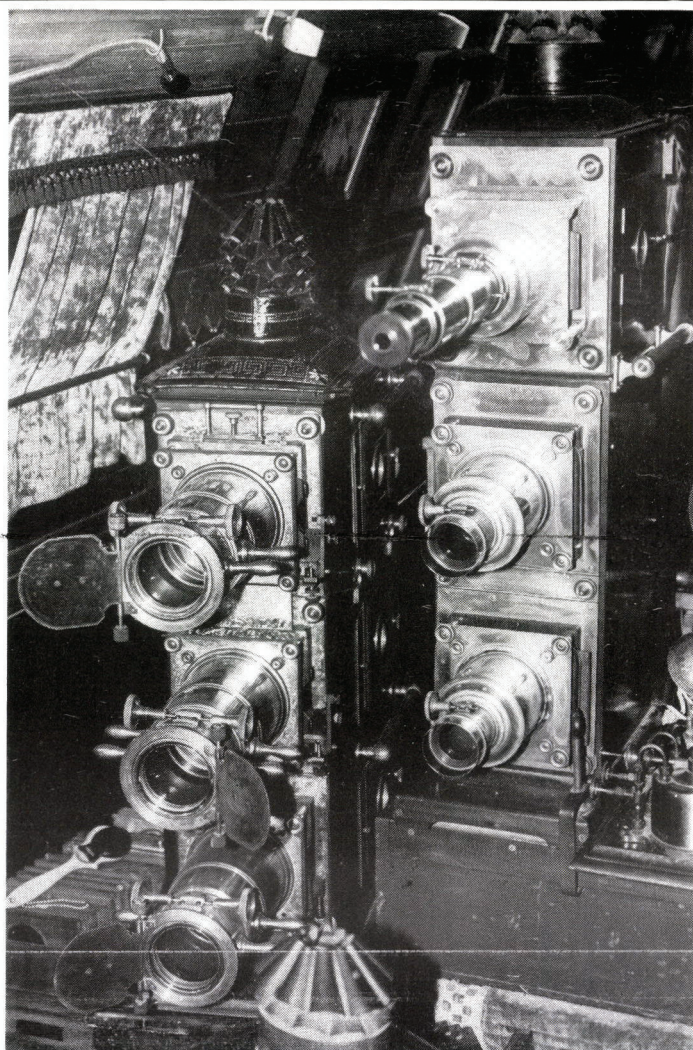


ABOVE
A 1905 Molliere hand cranked cinematograph. The show ends where the cinema started with a hand cranked showing of the Lumiere brothers first films. The copy used was printed by the British Film Institute for the Lears and is cranked by Anita at sixteen frames per second to various accompanying sounds from Doug.

BELOW
A prototype projecting microscope by William Greenwood featuring ¼, ½, and 1 inch objectives with matching sub stage condensers. (We hope to feature this unique lantern in our science series in a future issue.)



Technical footnote. The Phantasmagoria is not connected to mains electricity. Thus all the working illuminants of the Lear's boat are powered by twelve volt batteries which are recharged each day from a small portable Honda generator. The illuminants in the tri-unials are 12 volt 20 watt car lamps. Those in the elbow polariscope lantern are 12volt 50 watt quartz iodide lamps. The reflectors in an elbow polariscope demand the extra brilliance obtained from the q.i. lamps. The projection distance on the boat is about eight feet and the image size on the pull down rear projection screen is about four feet in diameter. The life span of the car bulbs is about four years, that of the quartz iodide about thirty hours. All the lamps are on dimmer circuits with special equipment having been provided by Electrosonics Ltd, one of the most advanced multiple projection concerns in the world.



ABOVE
A FINE PAIR. Stewards de-luxe tri-unial on the left, Newtons on the right with a demountable top section for single use. The Newtons is used in the Lear's regular nightly show.

BELOW
A silk poster from 1844. One of the many pieces of lantern ephemera lining the walls of the magic lantern lantern boat theatre.

