

HISTORY OR MYSTERY?

HISTORY OF A SOVEREIGN

Jeff Barnard

TRACING THE ORIGIN of particular magic lantern slides can sometimes be difficult, and my spasmodic research on one set has almost dried up. The slides in question are hand-coloured from printed outlines, titled *History of a Sovereign* and numbered 1 to 10 (with No. 7 missing). They bear no maker's name, but a brief printed description does appear on the edge of each slide. These read:

1. Gold Finding
2. The Monster Nugget, Carrying the Gold to the Coast
3. The Gold at the Bank
4. Assay, Melting and Granulating the Gold
5. Weighing the Gold
6. Pure or Standard Gold
7. [slide missing]
8. The Rolling Mill and cutting the Gold
9. The Cheese Vault
10. Coining the Golden Sovereign

In 1986 I wrote to the Royal Mint, thinking that would be a good starting place for my enquiries, but the reply from the Librarian and Curator indicated that the illustration of the coining press (Slide 10) had little in common with presses used by the Mint in the nineteenth century. He suggested the slides might have an Australian connection and referred me to the Curator of Numismatics at the Museum of Victoria in Melbourne.

The reply from 'down under' stated that the slides 'had nothing to do with Australian practice' and that the first two slides depicted activities of the 1840s and 1850s. Agreeing with the reply from the Royal Mint, it also stated that the press depicted in Slide 10 was very primitive and unlikely to be capable of producing enough pressure to strike a sovereign. The Australian curator went on to suggest that the slides contained much artistic licence and bore little resemblance to the realities of the mid-nineteenth century.

Hope of enlightenment faded somewhat after this and I did little more for nearly ten years, but in November 1996 I thought I would have another go at establishing the country portrayed in the slides. I wondered if the South African Mint could throw any light on the matter, but unfortunately I did not 'strike gold' with them either. However, I received a very detailed reply to my enquiry which made the following points:

Slide 1 shows 'panning for gold', but in South Africa gold was found in reef quartzite rock, not in rivers.

Slide 2 refers to 'the Monster Nugget', but gold there was usually found in particles embedded in quartzite rather than in nuggets.

Slide 10 confirmed that slides did not refer to South Africa, as the fly press illustrated is the type which would have been used in the early nineteenth century. The first coining press was not used in South Africa until 1892, and that was a mechanically driven press from Germany.

My South African contact felt that the slides had probably been produced in England by someone conversant with some aspects of minting coins, but the producer had merely used imagination as far as the origin of the gold was concerned. The one process missing from the slide images, which was specifically related to coin production, was die sinking and manufacture. So once again I seemed to have drawn a blank.

What then can I deduce from my research so far? Certainly there seems to be some discrepancy in the information conveyed in Slides 1 and 2, as they portray two entirely different methods of obtaining gold. One shows 'panning' for gold in a river, while the other implies mining for 'nuggets,' though there is still no clue as to geographical location. Perhaps, after all, the slides are the figment of some late Victorian's imagination and, until the appropriate 'reading' comes to light, the *History of a Sovereign* will remain a mystery.

Unless, of course, you know differently!

Jeff BARNARD has been an MLS member for well over twenty years. He is an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society in the Audio-Visual category, and has presented audiovisual shows in Sussex for the past thirty years – dissolving views accompanied by words and music, but nothing the Victorians weren't doing with magic lanterns over a hundred years ago!

Slide 1, 'Gold Finding'



Slide 2, 'The Monster Nugget, Carrying the Gold to the Coast'



Slide 10, 'Coining the Golden Sovereign'

