

# HENRY UNDERHILL

## ENTOMOLOGIST, GROCER, ANTIQUARIAN ... AND MAGIC LANTERN ARTIST

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**OVER A YEAR AGO**, an old wooden box labelled 'Underhill Slides' came to light, stored among the Photographic Archives of the Oxford University Institute of Archaeology. It contained many hand-painted lantern slides labelled 'The Great Stone Circles of Britain'. The miniature drawings, which were beautifully executed, and their subject matter attracted our attention. Each carried the initials *H.M.J.U.* and the date it was painted. Thus began our quest for the details of the life and works of the magic lantern slide painter, Henry Michael John Underhill (1).

Our first tentative searches led us to the National Register of Archives, which contained one entry for Henry Underhill, enigmatically described as 'grocer, entomologist and antiquarian'. A little more information on Underhill came from the Magic Lantern Society website, where, in the discussion forum, Stephen Herbert mentioned Underhill's entry in the *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern*.<sup>1</sup> Since then, we have tracked down numerous collections of his slides and photographs held in Oxford archives. Our research has led us deep into the Bodleian Library's Modern Manuscript collection, the Oxford Public Record Office, the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies and the private collection of Ian and Daphne Mackley. This is a preliminary report and our research continues.

Henry Michael John Underhill, known as Harry to his family and friends, was born in Oxford in 1855, the eldest son of Henry Scrivener Underhill.<sup>2</sup> In 1810 his grandfather, Michael Underhill, had established the family's business at 7 High Street, which dealt in tea and coffee and other high-class provisions and prospered in a University-dominated market. The Underhills became a prominent Oxford family. A number of them became Mayors and Aldermen, standing in the Liberal interest. The late nineteenth century was a time when the City Council was beginning to exert its independence from the University. The city was also beginning to change, experiencing both economic and population expansion.

Most of the Underhills were members of the non-conformist tradition, involved in the local temperance society and numerous educational and charitable schemes. Henry Underhill's uncle, Dr Edward Bean Underhill, was the secretary to the Baptist Missionary Society in Jamaica and India, and his grandfather, uncles and father were instrumental in setting up a Ragged School in Oxford for the non-sectarian education of the poorest children of the city.<sup>3</sup> His father, Henry Scrivener Underhill, was a founder of both the Oxford Boys' and Oxford Girls' Schools.<sup>4</sup> Annie Elizabeth Maud Underhill (known as Maud), Henry's sister, was the first name entered for Oxford Girls' School in 1875, in the company of the children of University lecturers and local businessmen.<sup>5</sup>

Though he had no official political life in Oxford, Henry Underhill participated in its social life through the numerous organisations supported by his family. According to contemporary sources he was a quiet, unassuming man who disliked confrontations. He was President of the George Street Congregational Sunday School and took a class there for many years. He had a prominent role working with the juvenile members of the Band of Hope temperance organisation. He was also a member of his church's Cricket Club and

Cycling Club, helping to organise local sports events. Many of his hand-painted lantern slides, particularly those depicting folk or fairy tales, were shown during entertainments put on by the Sunday School or Band of Hope. One of Henry's earliest magic lantern shows was for the Oxford Ragged Schools in 1889, according to a contemporary handbill.

Henry Underhill had been a pupil of the artist William Rivière, the father of the famous animalier Briton Rivière.<sup>6</sup> Sketchbooks now in the Oxford University Museum of the History of Science show an early interest in microscopy, entomology and other natural history subjects.<sup>7</sup> While in his early twenties, as a member of the Postal Microscopy Club, he published several articles in the popular science magazine *Hardwicke's Science-Gossip* with detailed drawings of flies and spiders, many of which were drawn from microscopic views.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that Henry was an excellent copyist with a talent for observation of minutiae, and this is demonstrated in his hand-painted lantern slides.

Many of his slides were inspired by illustrations from contemporary books, works of art, photographs or a close observation of nature. In some cases, he documented the source of the drawing on the captions of the slides or made notes in his sketchbooks. For example, some of his fairy tale slides were derived from children's book illustrators, such as Henry J. Ford's drawings for *Drakestail* in Andrew Lang's *Red Fairy Book* and John Batton's illustrations for *Guleesh*.<sup>9</sup> When an image was not a facsimile, Underhill signed his name or initials and dated each individual slide. These artistic influences are an area of research that still requires much work.

The collections of Underhill's hand-painted slides still in existence date from 1889 onwards. The majority appear to illustrate folk tales (2). A series of depictions of Japanese folk tales are among the earliest:

- Urshima the Fisher Boy* (1889)
- Tongue-Cut Sparrow* (1889)
- The Silly Jelly Fish* (1890)
- Monkey and Crab* (1890)
- Hare of Inabra* (1890)
- Two Men and the Goblins* (1894)

Japanese tales were popular in Britain in the late nineteenth century and were readily available in publications such as the series *Folk Tales of Japan* translated by Basil Hall Chamberlain and others.<sup>10</sup> Other folk tales for which Underhill painted slides include:

- The Snow Queen* (1889), Danish
- Dapplegrim* (1891), Norwegian
- Drakestail* (1891), French
- Brer Rabbit* (1891), American



1. Henry Michael John Underhill, 1855–1920, photographed in 1919 (Collection of the Folklore Society)

### NOTES

1. Stephen Herbert, David Robinson and Richard Crangle (eds), *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern* (London: Magic Lantern Society, 2001), 314. Underhill should not be confused with his close contemporary Alfred Underhill (born 1862; no relation), a photographer and slide maker of Croydon, Surrey. Both men were active simultaneously, and are mentioned regularly in the pages of the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal [OMLJ]* and other sources. They were perhaps mistaken for one another at the time, since the *OMLJ* editor would sometimes make a point of crediting Henry Underhill as 'H.M.J. Underhill (Oxford)'.
2. Obituary of H.M.J. Underhill, *Oxford Chronicle & Berks and Bucks Gazette*, 8 October 1920, and Henry Paintin, 'Oxford and the Underhill Family, 1532–1911', *Oxford Chronicle*, 16 September 1911.
3. *Annual Reports for the Oxford Ragged Schools 1860–1889*. Bodleian Modern Manuscripts, Oxon. 8° 799.
4. Obituary, Henry Scrivener Underhill, *Oxford Chronicle*, 26 February 1896, 8.
5. V.E. Stack (ed.), *Oxford High School: Girls' Public Day Trust 1875–1960* (Abingdon: Abby Press, 1963), 55.
6. R.T. Gunther, *Early Science in Oxford, Vol. XI: Oxford Colleges and Their Men of Science* (Oxford, 1937), 321–2. See also Museum of the History of Science, Oxford University, *MS Underhill 7*.
7. Museum of the History of Science, *MS Underhill 1–10*, dated 1869–91.
8. Underhill's series of articles entitled 'Notes on the Diptera I–III' and 'Spiders' Webs and Spinnerets' were published in *Hardwicke's Science-Gossip* in 1874–6.
9. See David Henry's review of *Drakestail visits the King*, in *NMLJ* Vol. 5 No. 1 (January 1987), 14–15, and David Henry, 'What a long time: but then, what a nice slide!' *NMLJ* Vol. 5 No. 3 (April 1988), 15.
10. The series was published in Tokyo (by Hasegawa or Kobunsha), and in London by Griffith, Farran & Co., between 1885 and 1888.





2. Tongue Cut Sparrow, slide 5, 1889  
(Ian and Daphne Mackley Collection)



3. Slide from Dapplegrim set, 1891  
(Collection of the Folklore Society)



4. Stonehenge, 1895  
(Institute of Archaeology Archives, University of Oxford)

Ivan Tsarevich (1892), Russian  
Knokgrafton (1892), Irish  
Guleesh (1893), Irish

Underhill continued the Japanese theme with a set of images entitled *Artistic Japan* painted in 1890. Fifty-three of these slides are now in the Folklore Society Archive. Several more Japanese-style bird slides are held by Oxford University's Museum of the History of Science. The Japanese art slides are reproductions of classical Japanese prints and paintings, birds and other animals. Included in the set are twenty-five of the *One Hundred Views of Fujiyama* by Hokusai of Yedo.<sup>11</sup> Several captions on the Artistic Japan slides indicate that they were taken from a 'chromoxylograph' book owned by Underhill. A handbill for a lecture on 'Artistic Japan' indicates that many of these famous Japanese paintings could be seen in the galleries of the British Museum. More detailed notes on the source of the images for this set can be found in Underhill's sketchbook *MS Underhill 5* in the Museum of the History of Science. This corpus of Japanese material reflects the general Western interest in Japan and *japonisme* during the 1890s.

Most of Underhill's intellectual life revolved around Oxford University. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the growth of various learned societies in Oxford that served as vehicles for intellectual communication between interested town-folk and academics. Records in the Bodleian Library from proceedings of these societies and contemporary newspaper reports indicate that Underhill was personally committed to a number of these societies, which drew their support from both 'town and gown'. Another more personal connection with the University was through his younger brother, George Edward (known as Edward), who was a fellow and tutor in Greats (classics and philosophy) at Magdalen College from the 1890s.

Henry Underhill was a founding member of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club, which held its first meeting on 27 May 1880.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the 1880s and 1890s he was a prominent member of this club, becoming its president in 1893. Later he became more involved in the Oxford Camera Club and was elected as a member in 1897.<sup>13</sup> Many of his magic lantern slide lectures were given to these two organisations, on a variety of subjects including prehistory, folklore, and technical tips.

In February 1893 Underhill's inaugural speech as president of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society was on *The Age and Distribution of Folk Tales*, 'with examples from Russian, Japanese and Irish Folklore, illustrated by Lime-light lantern'.<sup>14</sup> He illustrated this lecture with examples from his collection of hand-painted slides of folk tales. Apart from *Guleesh* and *Two Men and the Goblins*, all of his folk tale slides were created long before the delivery of this talk. This perhaps suggests that Underhill's interest in folk tales lay in more than mere entertainment value for children, and represented an example of the

growing intellectual studies of folklore and myth in academic circles during the late nineteenth century.

His earlier lectures to the Natural History Society had included *Spiders* (1887), *Insect Eyes* (1888), *Microscopic Organisms from Ponds* (1889), *Artistic Japan* (1890), *Painting Lantern Slides* (1891) and *A Holiday in Norway* (1892).<sup>15</sup> As yet, no slides from the entomological lectures have been identified, but the subject matter relates to both his early sketchbooks and his articles in *Hardwicke's Science-Gossip*. The *Painting Lantern Slides* lecture was published in *Midland Naturalist* and later in the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*.<sup>16</sup>

On 31 March 1892 Underhill lectured on *A Holiday in Norway* to the Natural History Society.<sup>17</sup> This set of slides is now in the archives of the Folklore Society. They show the flora and fauna of the area around Sogne Fjord, observed by Underhill during the previous summer, and are accompanied by general landscapes and hand-drawn maps. Twenty-one out of twenty-five slides are hand-painted, the remaining four being photographic images. Underhill noted on the captions of the bird slides that they were drawn from 'instantaneous photographs'. With the slides is a four-page description in Underhill's handwriting of the flora and fauna he observed, and a meticulous record of the dates and botanical names. It is interesting to note that the dates coincide with those of his Norwegian folk tale set *Dapplegrim*, in which fact and fantasy become combined in background and content (3). This marks a departure from the depiction of folk tales and the development of Underhill's interest in other subjects.

The set of hand-painted slides that prompted our search for Henry Underhill in the first place is in the archives of Oxford University's Institute of Archaeology, showing the megalithic monuments of south-west Britain. These were painted during the winter of 1895. Most were from photographs and sketches prepared earlier in that year. The details on the captions often include references to the publications from which plans, sections or maps had been taken. Underhill illustrated the stone circles of Stonehenge (4), Avebury, the Rollright Stones and Stanton Drew. He also included other ancient monuments such as Wayland's Smithy and Sarsen Stones on the Ridgeway, and menhirs from Dartmoor.

In February 1896 the *Oxford Chronicle* reported this lecture being delivered at a meeting of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society in the University Museum.<sup>18</sup> According to the article, Mr Arthur Evans, Keeper of Antiquities at the Ashmolean Museum, and Professor Poulton, Hope Professor of Entomology, were in attendance and led 'a long and interesting discussion' afterwards. This offers evidence of links between amateur and professional interests in pre-history during the late nineteenth century, and, in the case of Oxford, connections between 'town and gown'.

It became evident that Underhill had painted at least one other set of archaeological slides around this time. In July 1895 he delivered

11. Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, *MS. Top. Oxon. d. 316*, folio 25.

12. F.A. Bellamy, *A History of the Ashmolean Natural History Society* (Oxford: privately printed, 1908), 6.

13. On Underhill's involvement with the Natural History Society see Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, *MS. Top. Oxon. d. 316*, folio 84. On the Camera Club see Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, *MS. Top. Oxon. d. 624*, folio 91.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, *MS. Top. Oxon. d. 316* (folios 20, 22, 25, 36, and 37), and Bellamy, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

16. *Midland Naturalist* Vol. XIII n.s. (1890), 224-9. Republished as 'Artistic Lantern Slides', *OMLJ* Vol. 3 Nos 37 and 38 (June and July 1892), reprinted in *NMLJ* Vol. 5 No. 3 (April 1988), 14-15.

17. Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, *MS. Top. Oxon. d. 316* (folio 68).

18. *Oxford Chronicle* 12 February 1896, 5.





5. Colchester. Camulodunum: Roman Guard House, 1895 (Institute of Archaeology Archives, University of Oxford)



6. Cinderella: the final tableau, 1904 (Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive)



7. Gravestone of H.M.J. Underhill, in 2001 (photo: Megan Price)

a talk with 'exquisitely painted' lantern illustrations at the Annual Conference of the Midland Union of Natural History Societies, hosted by the Oxford Society. The talk was given in preparation for an excursion to the Stonefield Quarry and Roman villa near Long Hanborough. The Roman villa was almost certainly that of North Leigh, a large courtyard-style villa that had been excavated in 1813 and more extensively from 1815 to the 1820s. The villa is now under the protection of English Heritage and contains several preserved geometric mosaic pavements. Two years later Underhill repeated the lecture, 'Buried Roman Cities in England', at one of the regular meetings of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society.<sup>19</sup> We have recently located a number of these slides in Oxford's Institute of Archaeology. They depict scenes of Roman Colchester (5), Silchester, Wroxeter, and the villa at North Leigh.

During his long association with the Oxford Camera Club, Underhill regularly exhibited photographs and photographic lantern slides.<sup>20</sup> Some of his work achieved honourable mention in the Club's competitions, though he never received any of the higher prizes. His lectures to the Camera Club mainly concerned technical issues, such as various chemical mixtures for the development process or the latest photographic gadgetry. This echoes Underhill's continual enquiry into 'how things work', which could be seen in some of his earlier articles for the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*.<sup>21</sup>

In 1907, Underhill completed a photographic study of windmills in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Many of these photographs and their captions show and explain the working mechanisms of the mills. The project was coordinated locally by the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society as part of a nationwide drive to record through photography prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon remains; ecclesiastical architecture; domestic architecture; village scenes; ethnographic subjects; objects of natural history and portraits of historical significance.<sup>22</sup> Underhill's set of windmill images is used today as a valuable record by those interested in the industrial archaeology of the area, as many of the structures no longer exist. Underhill's personal lantern slide collection and a photo album showing many of these windmills are now in the Museum of the History of Science.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout his career as a slide painter, photographer, author and lecturer Underhill continued to organise performances with the Band of Hope children of Oxford. Many of these were magic lantern shows, but he also produced and wrote plays adapted from fairy tales. Programmes for the George Street Congregational Church and the Band of Hope events regularly list 'Mr H.M.J. Underhill and class'. The earliest record of a play was on 12 January 1894, adapted from a French Fairy tale, possibly combining elements of *Cinderella* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*.<sup>24</sup> This play was entitled *Oh What a Funny Nose! or Prince Charming and the Dear Little Princess*, and the production was billed as having 'lime-light effects'.

The Centre for Oxfordshire Studies recently obtained one of Underhill's photograph albums, dating from 1902 to 1904. It contains many photographs of children on stage or in costume. In this album, the 1903 production of *Tom Tit-Tot* featured a spinning wheel and Underhill included a series of technical images explaining how flax was spun on the wheel. In 1904 his production of *A Funny Nose* was performed again and this time recorded in photographs. The last photographs in the album show another performance of *Cinderella*, on 18 February 1904 (6). A stereo card in the Mackleys' collection dated February 1904 is probably from the same production, as it depicts children with musical instruments on a stage and is captioned, in Underhill's handwriting, 'H.M.J. Underhill' and 'Cinderella: The Band'.

At present there is a gap in our information about Underhill's activities from 1907, when he completed his study of the windmills, until the end of World War I. His last documented photographs were taken in 1918 and 1919 and are now in the Folklore Society archives. These include photographs of his family and friends during outings to local places of interest, visits to the countryside north of Oxford, along the Thames at Wolvercote, the river Dorn and Begbrook Woods. He also revisited Wayland's Smithy, the Uffington White Horse and other places along the Ridgeway, taking photographs of the sites he had painted over twenty years before for his lantern slides.

On 2 October 1920, after a long fight against cancer, Henry Michael John Underhill died at his home on the Woodstock Road, aged 65 and a bachelor.<sup>25</sup> He was buried with his mother, father and unmarried sister Maud, in the Wolvercote Cemetery in North Oxford (7). Throughout his adult life he was devoted to educating and entertaining children, often with his magic lantern slides or with plays he had adapted. As the eldest son of a family in business, it seems probable that his artistic, technical and scholarly interests took second place to the business of running the family shop, during a time of increasing commercial competition in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Oxford. The painted slides and photographs he created for lectures to various learned societies and children's entertainment reflect his talent for observation of minute detail and his painstakingly meticulous documentation of his subjects. A chance discovery of an old archive has brought this grocer, entomologist and antiquarian back into the limelight.

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**Megan PRICE** is working on a D.Phil in Archaeology at Wolfson College, Oxford University, writing on intellectual development of archaeology in Oxford in the late nineteenth century. Underhill is one of the case studies for her thesis. When not spending her time digging in archives, she excavates the windswept plains of Greece, Peru and Abingdon.

19. *Oxford Chronicle* 22 May 1897, 5; Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, MS. Top. Oxon. d. 317 (folio 149).

20. Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, MS. Top. Oxon. d. 764.

21. See for example 'Screens', *OMLJ* Vol. 2 No. 30 (November 1891); 'Instantaneous Dissolving', Vol. 3 No. 35 (April 1892); and a note to the editor on acquiring slides depicting the history and development of the bicycle, Vol. 5 No. 65 (October 1894). We would like to thank Lester Smith for bringing these articles to our attention.

22. Photographic Survey of England and Wales, Bodleian Library Modern

Manuscripts MS. Top. Oxon. d. 373/1.

23. There are at least two sets of these photographs in Oxford. Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, Dep. e. 65 is complete with 74 photographs mounted on card with an index. The other set is in the Museum of the History of Science along with magic lantern slides of the same subjects.

24. Bodleian Library Modern Manuscripts, G.A. Oxon. 4<sup>o</sup> 270.

25. Obituary of H.M.J. Underhill, *Oxford Chronicle*, 8 October 1920.