

PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS

DAVID FRANCIS

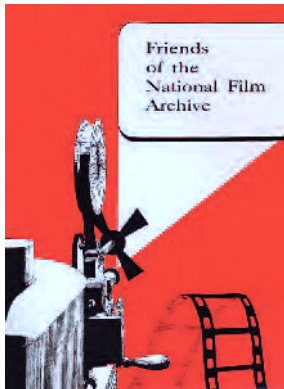
An interview profile by Jeremy Brooker
Part 1

I owe my enthusiasm for the magic lantern to my grandfather and John Betjeman, in that order.

One day in the winter of 1947 my grandfather said he had a treat for me. He produced from the basement a large magic lantern and a box of slides. The lantern had two lenses and was made of wood with brass fittings and most of the slides were in wooden frames and had moving parts. He proceeded to show the slides in random order. I was enthralled.

Many years later, when my father died, I discovered some newspaper cuttings describing shows in the Deptford area of London given by my great grandfather. No, I don't have the lantern and the slides. I was too young to appreciate this treasure trove and it disappeared when my grandfather died.

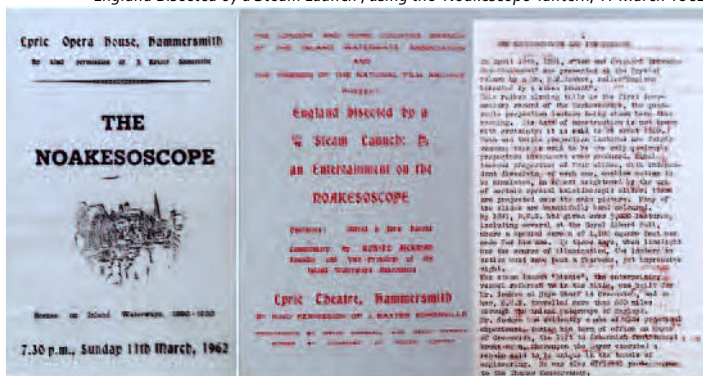
Where does John Betjeman come in? He wrote a piece in *The Spectator* in 1956 about a visit he made with Sir Arthur Elton, the celebrated documentary filmmaker, to a Mr Noakes, in Southend, where they were treated to a show using the four-lens lantern used by his father, Mr D.W. Noakes, at the Albert Hall.



Fast forward to 1961. I was now Television Acquisitions Officer at the National Film Archive and had just established the Friends of the NFA with Sir Arthur, one of the British Film Institute governors. We had to offer some benefits to donors and decided to mount a series of events. How could we make the first one special? Sir Arthur remembered his visit to Mr Noakes and I recalled the article I had read all those years ago. Why not start with a lantern show? I agreed to find out whether the quadrennial lantern still existed. With help from the Noakes family, I discovered that it was in the possession of a Mr Harold, who had assisted D.W. Noakes as a boy. I contacted him and he agreed to bring the lantern and some slides to London.

On 25 September 1961, at the National Film Theatre, we talked about the aims of the NFA Friends, and Mr Harold and his son gave a short presentation. The taster was so successful that I hired the Lyric, Hammersmith, for the night of Sunday 10 December 1961, and the Harolds, with the 'Noakesoscope', entertained a large audience, with an original Noakes programme, under the title 'The Victorian Era'. On 11 March 1962 we returned to the Lyric with another Noakes programme, 'England Bisected by a Steam Launch'. (The Inland Waterways Association was the co-sponsor of the evening.) Amazingly,

'England Bisected by a Steam Launch', using the 'Noakescope' lantern, 11 March 1962

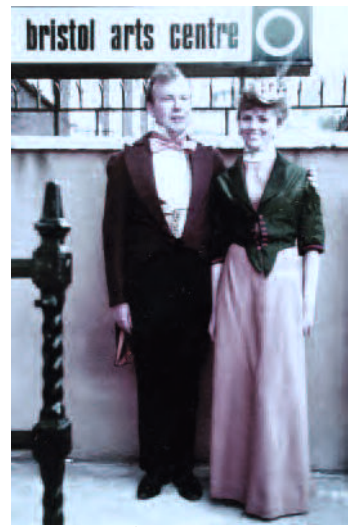


both the camera used to take the photographs and the steam launch that carried it had been built by D.W. Noakes. This time the theatre was almost full – and I was hooked on the magic lantern, for life.

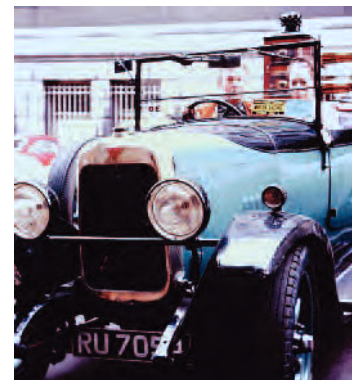
I soon started collecting slides. I also managed to buy a triennial lantern with all its accessories. My first presentation was at the opening of the Brighton Film Theatre on 15 June 1966. The next, one of my favourites, was at the Bristol Arts Centre in November 1966. Local presentations followed in quick succession.

By 1967, with the help of Exchange & Mart, I had amassed a large collection. It was time for an exhibition. The opportunity came when Lord Dynevor wrote to the BFI asking if they could mount an exhibition of pre-cinema devices at Dynevor Castle. The letter was passed to me, and I obliged from my own collection. It was hard work, but very satisfying.

Further afield, I accepted an offer from Jacques Ledoux, a colleague and friend from the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP), to give a lantern presentation for the opening of the Musée du Cinéma in Brussels on 6 July 1967. How could we generate publicity? I had an idea. Why shouldn't we go to Brussels in my 1928 Alvis open tourer, with the triennial strapped to the luggage grid? Alas, we had to travel on pavé roads, because a car with only two wheel brakes was not allowed on the motorway. But the car, the lantern and the slides survived the bumpy ride, and we gave the Museum a good opening boost.



A youthful DF with Viennese assistant, Bristol Arts Centre



DF in his Alvis, with lantern

When I returned to the UK, I was given the opportunity to write about my enthusiasm for the magic lantern in the pages of the Christmas issue of *Country Life*. The article was beautifully illustrated. Then BBC 2 asked: Would I do a lantern show on Late Night Line Up? Tony Bilbao was the host, and the show would be live: so any mistakes would be broadcast! Luckily all went well, and at least one person liked it, because the comedian Marty Feldman chose it as his favourite programme of the year. Later, Horizon asked if they could borrow material from my collection for a 1968 Christmas programme called Phantasmagoria, a fictionalised account of a travelling lanternist, directed by the Hungarian documentary filmmaker Robert Vas.





DF and Sylvia Miles at the lantern. Photo by Sir George Pollock



BBC2 Victorian Pastimes
Collection of BBC cuttings



The next big presentation was in April 1969 at the Vienna Filmmuseum, at the invitation of Curator Peter Konlechner. Sylvia Miles and I did three shows on three successive nights. We were shattered. The Filmmuseum presented us with the original of the beautiful poster that was produced for the occasion. (This poster reappears in my story later.)

Most of my shows in this period were aimed at demonstrating the relationship between lantern-slide story-telling and early fiction films: I and my collaborators were interested in movement, and the form and language of both media. We also tried to use examples of common texts, so Dickens and Sims slide sets were often used.

Although I am sure that future members of the Magic Lantern Society were already giving lantern presentations, all over Britain, everybody in London seemed to turn to me. I gave three shows in the seventies at the Twikinema Bijou Palace, which was enthusiastically run by Allen Jacobs, who accompanied on the cinema organ. There were shows at Pollock's Toy Museum, the Kodak Museum, and the Royal Photographic Society. I also did several at the NFT. One was a misguided attempt to project on smoke, using a pair of phantasmagoria lanterns with argand burners filled with colza (whale) oil. The ex-army smoke canister was too powerful, and the colza oil smelt terrible. The audience left coughing, spluttering and cursing.

In May 1971 I made a programme in the series Victorian Pastimes with Lionel Lambourne of the V & A as presenter. A friend recently found a copy. It is frightening to see what you were like when you were younger! I was certainly a little over enthusiastic and poor Lionel hardly got a word in edgeways, since the camera kept following my dashes and interruptions. My wife Joss and I laughed so hard as we watched that we fell off the sofa.

The next invitation from abroad came from the Swedish Film Institute. I believe Ingmar Bergman (a lantern enthusiast) had something to do with it, because I was asked to bring a 9.5

mm projector to give to him: he had shot his first films on 9.5 mm, and wanted to see them again. In return, his cameraman Sven Nykvist would film our lantern presentation on 35 mm colour film. Alas the film has disappeared. Perhaps it is still somewhere at the Swedish Film Institute.

I became NFA Curator in 1974, and it was clear that if I wanted to survive that demanding job, I would have to curtail my lantern activities. So I was positively delighted when Roger Orme started talking about forming a Magic Lantern Society. The inaugural meeting took place at Corsham on 23 October 1976. I was elected acting Chairman and convened the business meeting that followed in January 1977, when Ron Morris was elected our first permanent Chairman. In its early days the Society held summer meetings at the Archive's Berkhamsted premises, and its AGMs at the NFT.

In 1990 I left the Archive and went to the United States as a consultant to the Library of Congress. Eighteen months later I became 'Chief' of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division, another tough job. So I didn't even bring my collection to the States until 1994. However, when I did, news got around. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Library of Congress and Eastman House International Museum of Photography in Rochester, NY, all wanted shows. In them, I focused on the same key theme as in my UK presentations: the importance of the magic lantern to the study of early cinema.

Particularly after the conference on early cinema (1900–1906) that I organised in Brighton in 1978, a new generation of film historians, like Charles Musser and Tom Gunning, had come to see the history of the moving image as a long continuum: there was no sharp divide between 'cinema' and 'pre-cinema'. They were more and more interested in the magic lantern and the stories it told. Thus demand for presentations increased. And, because US distances are so great, invitations in the East tended to gravitate towards me.

Luckily, the demand coincided with my retirement from the Library of Congress. I did another presentation at MOMA in April 2000, and one at Eastman House in December 2001, and was invited by Charlie Musser to go to Yale in October 2002. Then, in 2005, my lantern life took a new turn.

TO BE CONTINUED

