



John Arthur Roebuck Rudge
1837-1903

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST (AND ERNEST)

Alexia Lazou

For me, a highlight of working with museum collections is the 'side alley' of information I can often find myself disappearing down. I am currently working with material from the Barnes Collection of film-related ephemera at Hove Museum, scanning images and cataloguing it on our collections database. This is part of a wider project funded by the John Ellerman Foundation called 'Film Pioneers' – look out for the forthcoming 'Experimental Motion' exhibition in the Spotlight Gallery at Brighton Museum.

It was a series of newspaper cuttings in the Barnes Collection which caught my attention. Over the years there has been much debate about who actually invented 'the moving picture'. William Friese-Green is often cited, possibly due to the influence of the 1951 film *The Magic Box*, released to coincide with the Festival of Britain. However, the film is considered to have presented a 'romanticised' account of the facts (laced with many fictions).

One of the minor figures in the film is Rudge, an inventor with whom Friese-Green worked. It is thought that Rudge's early experimentation in creating moving images influenced Friese-Green, who adopted the same ideas and expanded them. Many film historians now dismiss Friese-Green's contribution to the advancement of cinematic technology, as others working in the field at the same time produced more successful equipment, but there is no doubt that Friese-Green and his mentor experimented enthusiastically towards this goal.

So who was Rudge? John Arthur Roebuck Rudge was born in Bath on 26 July 1837. His friends called him a 'JAR of Knowledge' (from his initials) and his work ranged from penny-in-the-slot machines to early X-ray apparatus. He was the inventor of the biophantascope, a type of magic lantern designed to project a sequence of still photographs so as to create the illusion of movement on screen. One of his early experiments features a young boy, Frank Huxtable. Frank was photographed making a variety of facial expressions which were then animated using the biophantascope.

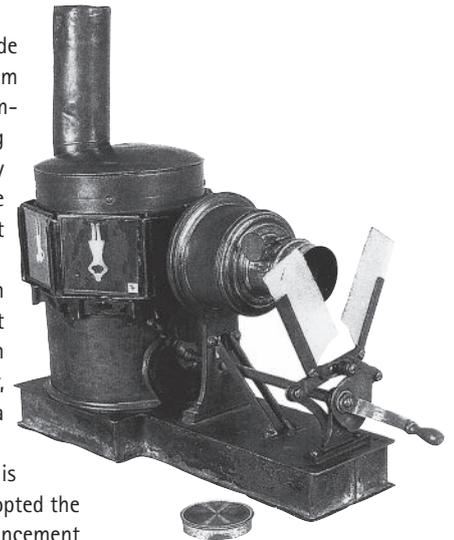
Many of the newspaper cuttings relating to Rudge are 'letters to the editor', written to the *Bath Chronicle and Herald* by Ernest Crawford – a somewhat eccentric character himself. Ernest by name, earnest by nature it seems. Being a young friend of Frank Huxtable, Ernest had known Rudge personally and apparently joined in with these photo gurning sessions. He clearly admired Rudge and made it his mission to see the inventor gain the respect he was due. Crawford's letters, dated from around 1934-43, are just a sample of his 'yearly reminders' to the residents of Bath that they (particularly the 'eager ... fellow citizens [who] enjoy the moving pictures') should honour Rudge by placing flowers on his grave on the anniversary of his birth. The general tone – that of an outraged headmaster admonishing his pupils – perhaps did not endear him to the readers.

When Rudge died in 1903 he was virtually penniless. It wasn't until 1926 that a memorial stone was put up in St Michael's Cemetery, Rudge's final resting place, after Crawford's '22 years' unremitting agitation' (Fig. 1). The headstone was paid for by Alderman Cedric Chivers who also funded a grand and wordy plaque to both Rudge and Friese-Green, sited near Rudge's house in New Bond Street, which can still be found alongside another smaller plaque (Fig. 2). This rather more concise panel is the 'persistently banned citizens' tablet' referred to by Crawford (its designer) and paid for by local subscribers. Permission to mount it on Rudge's former house was refused by the Bath Corporate Property Committee for 'no valid reason'. However, it seems that Crawford at last won this match. In his own words: 'One might almost suspect the world of a conspiracy to ignore Rudge, and my efforts to rescue his name from oblivion have been a continual and watchful contest ...'

Intrigued by this correspondence, I resolved to go and find Rudge's grave myself, armed with photographs from the Barnes Collection, possibly taken in the late 1980s or early 1990s. An internet search had yielded an article by Adrian Payne, surely a spiritual descendant of Ernest Crawford, making a plea via the *Bath Chronicle* for the inscription on Rudge's headstone to be restored. Adrian, who had been 'involved in cinematograph engineering for most of my working life', was now 80 years old and felt that he could not take up this project himself.

Spurred on by these words of a contemporary Crawford, I found the perfect opportunity to visit when the Society met in Bath. In 1943 Crawford was 'utterly astonished' to find the vacant vase he had provided 'now filled with a fine bouquet of yellow flowers'. As the vase was no longer there I found my own appropriate one – a vessel fashioned as a jar which functioned as a lantern. Having removed the light fitting I filled it with sunflowers, nature's own illuminants.

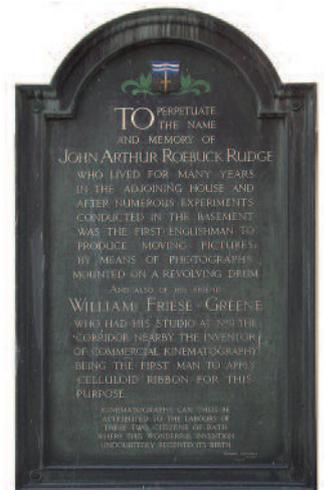
2017 will be the 180th anniversary of Rudge's birth. A fitting gift for a pioneer from the end of the magic lantern age would be to restore the inscription on his grave. Please get in touch if you would like to receive email updates on the Rudge Inscription Project (RIP): alexialazou@yahoo.co.uk (or tel: 01273 698278).



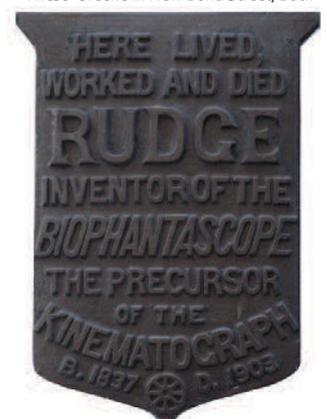
The Biophantic Lantern



1. Rudge's headstone in 1997 (above) and (below) today (2016)



2. The two plaques to Rudge and Friese-Green in New Bond Street, Bath



The author is Collections Assistant for the Film Pioneers project at Hove Museum and Art Gallery. The full version of this article can be found on the website of Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove at www.brightonmuseums.org.uk/discover/2016/07/26.