

THE WIT AND WISDOM OF 'THE OLD LANTERNIST'

Keith Utteridge

Mervyn Heard's idiosyncratic musings on a lanternist's world, including advice on overcoming problems encountered along the way, are legendary. These clips are taken from the Society's Newsletter when Mervyn was editor. They illustrate his inimitable wit and sideways look at life as well as being a lasting legacy of a much-loved and distinguished master showman.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.10)

You have a popular story set and inadvertently 'lose' some of the slides. It may be that they are dropped onto a stone floor, left on a train or stolen by rooks – it happens to us all. Rather than go to the expense of purchasing anew, it is often possible to combine one part set with another. For example I am currently regaling audiences with the sad tale of Jane Conquest – a sailor's wife who, witnessing her husband's ship caught in a terrible storm, throws on her overmantle, runs from the cottage, climbs a beanstalk and is never seen again. Many have said this version has the edge on the original.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.8)

Some lantern lectures can be awfully dry and boring. In my opinion anything that can lighten them is worth considering. Farmyard noises from the rear of the auditorium during a talk on animal husbandry, for example. Or the wearing of a hat with corks hung round it for a tour of the Australian outback. However, be wary. On one occasion I was asked to operate the lantern for a talk entitled 'The Dominant Primate'. I turned up sporting a gorilla costume, only to discover that the subject was the Archbishop of Canterbury. I hastily fashioned a dog collar from cardboard and put it on over the costume. For some reason, this only seemed to make things worse.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.15)

The correct name for an item of equipment used to draw attention to the detail of an image on a lantern screen is a 'lecturer's cane', not a 'pointer' (a breed of dog), a 'rod' (a unit of length) or a 'sticky thing' (a doughnut). If you do not wish to invest in a lecturer's cane, the following will do just as well: a garden cane, a broom handle, starched parcel twine.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.3)

Always double check your slides are in the right order before presenting a show, especially when dissolving view sequences are involved. I recall on one occasion commencing an entertainment with a verisimilitude of our beloved Queen. After the first wave of approbation from the audience I duly raised the light in the second chamber of my biunial, anticipating the appearance of the legend 'Long May She Reign' above Her Majesty's head. However, I had neglected to check my slides and the effect for Mount Vesuvius appeared instead. Thus a large white moon appeared over her right shoulder and smoke began billowing from her bodice. This embarrassing error was sadly compounded by a crowd of drunken wretches at the rear of the hall crying out, with one voice, "She's all fired up and ready to blow!" Not the sort of behaviour one might expect from nuns.



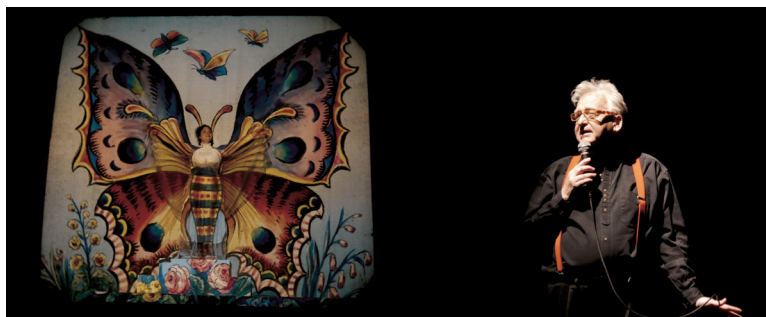
Photo: Geoff Fletcher

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.2)

The Beard patented 'Eclipse' slide carrier is a most excellent device when properly used. For those unfamiliar with its operation it enables one to insert a slide into the lantern gate, whilst simultaneously withdrawing the preceding image. Many lanternists are uncomfortable with the carrier since the ejected slide must be 'caught' to stop it dropping to the floor and breaking. Alternatively, if one ejects the slide too swiftly, there is every likelihood that the slide will shoot sideways across the room and put someone's eye out. Indeed, to be quite frank, as a slide changer it is a complete disaster. However, one will find it an invaluable device to use at Christmas parties, when one is required to distribute cream crackers to the poor. A quick flick of the wrist can send one right to the back of the hall.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.5)

I am constantly being asked by professional lecturers what I would recommend as the most subtle method for indicating to the lantern operator that a change of slide is required, when one is without one's signalling lamp. Opinions vary. Normally I would suggest a polite cough. However this is not recommended during a 'flu epidemic. I recall one such occasion when, due to rogue coughing amongst other members of the audience, an intended two-hour lecture was completed in eight minutes and I had to receive treatment for both a broken wrist and nervous tic. A more inventive signalling method – though one requiring some practice – may be found in the book A Hundred and One Positive Uses for Flatulence by A. Stamford Bright.



Photos: Artemis Willis

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.18)

The firm of Pullit and Firmly in Old Compton Street has just introduced a new line in short illustrated lantern lectures, suitable for presentation to young folk. The most popular subjects in this 'Peeps into' series being:

- Peeps into Pipes (a social history of the Meerschaum)
- Peeps into Popes (famous Roman pontiffs)
- Peeps into Poops (sailing ship architecture) and
- Peeps into ... (the life and works of a 17th century diarist whose name escapes me for the moment).

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.9)

A few months ago one of my exhibitions was upset when a nude nonagenarian ran across the stage during 'Christie's Old Organ' shouting "How's this for old?" Luckily it was a very cold hall, so the potential effect upon the sensitive was diminished. I recommend, in similar circumstances, that you do as I did: despatch someone to apprehend the culprit and ensure he will not return. I sent the churchwarden. Yesterday I was reminded of the incident when I received a postcard from both the naked man and churchwarden who now run a successful dog-grooming parlour in Troon.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.14)

When travelling by steam train it is unwise to leave the lantern box unattended in the guard's van. On one occasion my biunial was inadvertently put off by the guard at an unmanned halt in the middle of Berkshire. It was only when I reached my destination, some forty miles down the line, I discovered it was missing. When my biunial was finally retrieved two days later, there was a family of sparrows living in the upper lamp-house and a retired jockey living in the box.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.4)

Never put an ice-cold slide into a red-hot lantern. I have met a number of lanternists officiating at a winter exhibition who have made the mistake of succumbing to an audience's wish to see a particular view and sent their

assistant to retrieve same from a slide box lying on the stone floor of an unheated hallway. As soon as the precious slide was inserted into the hot machine there was a resounding crack. So be sure and warm the slide a little first. A friend has suggested that the best way to accomplish this is to insert the slide into your trouser pocket and rub it briskly against your leg whilst you continue with other items. However I cannot recommend this practice. The last time he did this an elderly lady attacked him with an umbrella and another fainted.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.13)

When your spoilt young nephew offers to stage an impromptu magic lantern show this Christmas, suggest he presents a phantasmagoria. Have him pin up a sheet on the door frame and secrete the lantern behind it. As soon as he announces the grand entertainment, get ready. The instant he disappears behind the sheet, leap to your feet, slam the door and lock it.

Old Lanternist's Tip (No.19)

Someone has asked me whether I've ever tried frying an egg on a hot lantern. The answer is no! And I've never tried sticking a pencil up my nose either. It appals me that this is the level of enquiry I now receive and I aim to close down this column. In actual fact I have decided to retire from the lantern business entirely and open a gentlemen's outfitters in Luton. They tell me that paper spats are likely to be the next big thing.

ANOTHER MAN'S WIG

Mervyn Heard

(To be read with a very 'posh' accent)

'Twas the eve of the Faversham's New Year soirée at the Faversham's Bayswater House
And while many girls danced, others just sat and talked –
and tried to pretend they were nice

Some ate fondant creams or spoke in hushed tones but young Evelyn spoke at full tilt
For her poor heart was fluttering in her bos(o)m, like a sparrow trapped up a man's kilt
For she knew that at some point her affianced was due, young Roger de Moletrembler-Smythe
That this was the night he would profer his hand and ask her to be his young bride



It was just as the talk turned to cellulite as all conversations soon do
That said Roger arrived and led her away for that purpose of which she knew
To the Faversham Library, by the coats, 'neath the banned works of Percy Bysshe Shelley
Roger de Moletrembler dropped to the floor and proposed – with his knee in some jelly
But reply came there none, least not straight away, for she fixed his bowed head with a stare
Saying: "Oh my God Roger, pray tell me at once, what on earth has become of your hair?
Those fine golden locks that I so much admired have changed from their corn-speckled hue
To a colour akin to a bright tangerine. Pray tell me, what has happened old fruit?"
"I confess, my dear Evelyn, those locks you admired, they were not mine own but a piece
And last night, as I sat fishing down by the brook, it was nicked by two barnacle geese.
The hairpiece you see is an alternate job which belonged to my great uncle Ted
I found it amongst his final effects in a suitcase shoved under the bed.

But old thing, please do not mind, for I can aver 'tis a measure quite au temporaire
For I have ordered another one just like the foregone
from Wigs'r'Us in Leicestershire Square
But Evelyn she uttered never a word. She just turned and looked horribly sad
And Roger he knew that this one thoughtless act was no less than the act of a cad.
He knew that he'd done something most non de rigueur,
that his standing was not worth a fig.
He had done that one thing that could not be put right –
he'd proposed in another man's wig.

Rejected and ostracised by all his friends, young Roger returned to his flat.
He sat in the window and said his goodbyes – to his golf clubs and trusty old bat.
He pulled a revolver from out of the drawer, poured a whisky and took a large swig
Then he blew out his brains so as not to dishonour, dishonour another man's wig.

