

TIME TRAVELLING: AN APERTURE INTO ANOTHER ERA

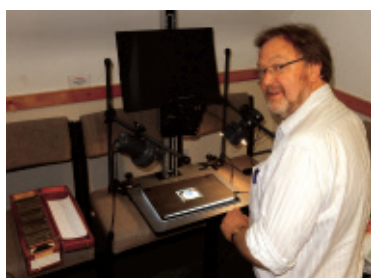
Tony Lidington

People who read this might know me best as the Raree Man with my peepshow (Fig. 1), which I still trail across festivals and events around the UK: it was here that I first encountered the world of magic lanterns. On this project, I worked with Professors John Plunkett and Joe Kember at Exeter University, unearthing the connections between the static private view and the primitive moving imagery of nineteenth century optical toys and magic lanternism. My particular interest lay with the element of interaction with the itinerant showmen (raree men or galantee men), who presented their peepshows and lantern shows at fairgrounds and events



1. Peepshow poster (left)

2. The cinnabar moth from Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum archive (above)



3. Richard Crangle with his 'fancy' set-up

throughout the country. My research introduced me to the rich resources of the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum and Dr Richard Crangle, whose digitisation of slides for the Lucerna Project enabled me to create a peepshow called *Lucky Dicky Crangle and the Cinnabar Moth*, using a range of unseen slides from the archives of Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) (Fig. 2).

Just before Christmas, I was approached by a friend who asked me if I knew of anyone who would be interested in acquiring a collection of glass slides belonging to his great aunt who had lived in Norfolk. My first port of call was Richard Crangle (Fig. 3) who agreed to meet me at my house and take an initial look through the collection so that he could tell me if they had any value and the best means of disposal. We met in the New Year over coffee and biscuits, and placed a selection of the 500 slides onto Richard's light-pad.

This enabled us swiftly to ascertain that the collection was not hugely valuable and certainly not of any great interest to a museum. However, there were some hand-painted early slides that would interest individual collectors and also some interesting-looking complete commercial sets.

We agreed that the next stage should be to spend a day together digitising the collection: this meant that we could offer the donor a copy of their original images, whilst at the same time contributing to the Lucerna archive and helping with the process of advertising the slides for sale. We met at Exeter University and Richard brought his digitising equipment: an A4 light-pad, two anglepoise lamps, a camera and a vertical camera stand. To a technophobe such as me, Richard's equipment was impressive. While I made the coffee, he set it all up and we were ready to go.



4. Title from Peter Pan slide set (Dodie Masterman collection)



5. The Cricket on the Hearth by Charles Dickens (Dodie Masterman collection)

mid-19th-century slides of sumptuous landscapes, full sets of transfer stories such as *Peter Pan* and *Goldilocks*, some 'Life Model' staged photographic stories from Dickens and other sundry items.

I went back to the keeper of the collection to tell him of our progress and also to ask for some details about the original source, as Richard wanted to place a credit on the Lucerna site. It transpired that the original collector had been Dodie Masterman – a glamorous socialite, artist and model of the 1930s.

Dodie was a fine artist, illustrator and an avid collector of toy theatre, prints and ephemera of all sorts. The magic lantern slides combined several of her interests and had largely been acquired over years of visiting Portobello Road in West London on Saturday afternoons. Richard has edited, labelled and itemised the collection, which is now publicly available on the Lucerna site. I am in the process of trying to

It was an efficient system: each slide was placed on the light-pad within a frame of black card to block out the excess light. The camera was focussed at a set distance from the slide to maximise the image, but to include the edge and glass frame. The lamps were shone onto the top of the slide from opposite sides of the light-pad so that the slide was lit without shadowing. Richard then took each slide in turn and placed it within the card frame on the light-pad. I then replaced the slides in their boxes. Richard was keen to capture any labelling on the sides of slides and also to show the dimensions and depth of the frame for the wooden-framed slides. Each slide was saved in a high-definition format and transferred to a laptop. The whole process took just two hours to digitise completely the 500 slides!

The haul revealed some lovely treasures – hand-painted,



6. Hand-painted slide in wooden frame (Dodie Masterman collection)



7. Dodie Masterman (1918-2009)



8. *The Pierrotters in Filey*

sell the items, so if you happen to be interested in any particular aspects, do get in touch!

However, the experience piqued my interest and I resolved to find a way of digitising my own small collection of glass slides. My main area of research for the last 35 years has been the history and practice of seaside entertainment – I performed with ‘The Pierrotters’ for 27 years (Britain’s last professional seaside pierrot troupe) (Fig. 8) and I have amassed the world’s largest archive of images and materials relating to seaside pierrots and concert parties. I had a few glass slides of troupes on the beach and I was keen to see if I could replicate Richard’s set-up without having to invest in expensive equipment. So this is how I did it: I raided the household for a couple of lamps (one an anglepoise, the other just a bedside lamp), I did have to buy a light-pad (I got a small-ish one from Amazon for £30), I found a retort stand and clamp from my local school (in place of the camera stand) and clamped my iPhone (other mobile phones are available) in a horizontal position above the light-pad with a selfie-stick which came with a remote control, Bluetooth

button. I then placed a slide on the light-pad, framed by card (Fig. 9). The cost was minimal, but the effect extraordinary! I downloaded the images onto my computer and adjusted them in ‘Picture Editor’ so that I had lovely, digitised versions of the original slides – below, you can see the difference between a scan on my usual scanner and my new, Heath-Robinson set-up (Figs 10(a) and (b)).

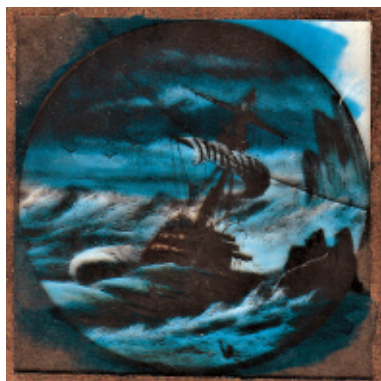
However, although many of the slides proved interesting when viewed as a digital image, I was not ready for the revelatory experience of seeing a glass negative leap to life for the first time! I had, in my seaside collection, just a few negative glass slides of pierrot troupes performing on the beach. Richard had shown me that it was possible to convert negative images to positives through a free download program called ‘GIMP’. I transferred the image taken from my higgledy-piggledy set-up onto the program and clicked the ‘Invert’ button ... it was like alchemy! A whole new realm of imagery that had lain dormant for at least a hundred years leapt into life. The image was sharp and detailed: it wasn’t posed,



9. *The improvised set-up on my desk!*

it was full of life and action. I could zoom right in to see faces and details of costumes and instrumentation. This was an image that predated the commercial picture postcard images of 1903: it was clear to me, by looking at the costumes, that the image must have been taken during a specific era – between Clifford Essex’s first pierrot troupe in 1891 and the start of postcard imagery in 1903. You can see the pierrots in full performance mode and once I realised that I had the image the wrong way around, I used the computer program to ‘flip’ the image so that I could read the harbour registration codes of the boats hauled up onto the beach – and thereby identified the location as being somewhere near Shoreham-by-Sea on the Sussex coast (Figs 11(a) and (b)).

It is such a simple set-up but the potential for revealing a vast reservoir of imagery is immense. Every collection can now be viewed, shared and investigated with virtually no outlay and



10. (a) *Image produced with my ordinary computer scanner (Dodie Masterman collection)*



10. (b) *Image produced with my improvised set-up (Dodie Masterman collection)*

minimal technical expertise. While there is little to compare with the magic of an authentic lantern show – with projectors, slides and a lanternist/lecturer – the advances in new technology mean that a whole world of visual 19th-century contexts is being rediscovered and made accessible for the first time in a hundred years. It is a revelation that has profound implications for our understanding of this period and its representation in the modern age. For my own part, it provides an opportunity to view images related to my particular area of research – seaside entertainment. Most of the images with which I am familiar come from promotional shots and postcards (circa 1903 onwards), but a large number of lantern slides predate these, so any lantern slide images of seaside pierrots and blackfaced minstrels performing are of particular interest to me. I would welcome readers getting in touch if they have any slides as I would love to add them to my collection in either glass or digital form (email: info@prom-prom.com).



11. (a) *Negative of the Royal Pierrots (Tony Lidington collection)*



11. (b) *Positive and ‘flipped’ image of the Royal Pierrots (Tony Lidington collection)*