
THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Richard Feltham

A while back (about four years!), the Novium Museum in Chichester contacted the MLS for help in identifying and cataloguing their collection of magic lanterns and slides. **George Auckland** asked if there was any member who would be able to help. As I seem to spend one or two days a week in the area, with local bands, I rashly volunteered.

At the initial meeting, I was told that their collection included items donated by Shippam's (a family with a famous meat paste business), former members of Chichester Photographic Society, and items found in local schools and churches. I was given a copy of their inventory which they told me was probably incomplete and not very accurate.

The first task was to search through box after box in the storeroom, trying to identify if the

box actually contained what it said – especially interesting when the box on top was labelled 'BOMB!' Many of the items had been misidentified. I had hours of fun sorting through boxes and boxes marked 'Magic Lantern Slides' that turned out to be glass plate negatives, and vice versa. The hardware had also suffered during moves of the Museum, with parts of the same item being separated and stored incorrectly. Slide sets had been mixed up and descriptions lost.

The next step was to catalogue and photograph all the hardware, part by part, as each removable part needed to be catalogued separately so that, if they became separated in the future, they could be reunited. I started with the hardware because the thought of cataloguing and identifying the hundreds of slides was quite daunting. Thankfully **Richard Crangle** was already undertaking a much larger, but similar, task at Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum and was able to give me help and encouragement.

As I started on the slides, I was able to identify the manufacturer, dates and individual slides in sets with the invaluable help of the Lucerna web resource. This resource and the



The Chichester Photographic Society in 1901



Presentation of the WW1 tank

MLS Readings Library greatly assisted in reuniting slides into the correct set and identifying missing slides. That was the easy part – the problems really started with identifying the photographic slides made by local photographers. Like most photographers, they either did not label their slides or added a generic label. My work was much helped when the Chichester Camera Club held an exhibition at the Museum. They had discovered the original minutes book from the 1880s in the Chichester Records Office. I was able to relate many slides to named photographers and photographic outings described in the records. The joy of photographic slides is the huge amount of detail in the images. This gives enough information to enable an internet search to find a location or an event. All this information was pulled together to identify and roughly date most of the slides.

The manufactured slides were all well-known examples, with the only moving slide being 'A man eating a rat', and the most interesting set being *A Photographer's Perplexities*. The photographic slides, however, contained some interesting slides of local interest including the presentation of a WW1 tank, purchased by the city, and several slides depicting a visit of Lord John Sanger's circus to the city. My favourite image is of Sanger's elephants parading through the centre of Chichester. Who knew that I would find elephants in the storage room?!



Sanger's elephants parading through Chichester