

SUMMER MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

LACEY GREEN MILLENNIUM HALL, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, UK

Saturday 22 July 2023

Over 50 MLS members gathered on a cold, wet summer day to do the only sensible thing – enjoy a feast of magic lantern shows. After an introduction from Chair **Richard Feltham**, **Andrew Gill** gave us an insightful retrospective of **Graystone Bird** (80 years after his death), whose name was lost to the extent that his grandson **David** knew nothing about his work until Andrew 'found' him during his research. Unlike other pre-eminent photographers from the turn of the 19th/20th centuries, he only produced magic lantern slides, not paper prints.

Graystone Bird was born in Frome, Somerset, in 1862 where his father **Frederick** ran a photographic business. They moved to Bath and in the 1881 Census Graystone was listed as an assistant photographer. The core of the business was portrait photography but by about 1893 they were producing lantern slides. Graystone took over the business when his father retired in 1896. He was an astute businessman selling direct to the public and to the trade, publicising his work by winning prestigious prizes at home and abroad. Andrew found it difficult to understand how he produced so many slides when the business was run by just the family and one



Lots of interest in the market



Martin Gilbert with his triunial lantern

story slides **Michael** pointed out clues to their Dutch origin. These included a shop with 'wig maker to the king' in Dutch over the door, a typical landscape with windmill, and a cheesemaking sequence finishing with the 'national sport' of cheese throwing! Next he looked at some of the slides of historical figures such as **Prince William I of Orange** (1533-84) (helpfully labelled), his enemy **King Philip II of Spain** and **William's assassin Balthasar Gerards**. He concluded with slides with four images showing trades, including a magic lanternist. **Martin** then projected some of the slides, including a few skeletons appearing horizontally and vertically. He finished with a wonderful slipping slide telling the story of a lanternist arriving at a house, giving a show with changing images and leaving after being paid.

Mary Ann Auckland then showed a set of 12 wood-mounted slides (maker unknown) of the *Diverting History of John Gilpin shewing how he went Farther than he intended, and came safe home again*. Written in 1782 by **William Cowper** (1731-1800), the poem is probably based on a **Mr Beyer**, a linen draper of Paternoster Square in London.

After lunch we saw a short film – *A Portrait of Herman Bollaert* made under the auspices of the *B-Magic* project. Although focussed on an interview with **Herman** talking about his introduction to magic lanterns and his famous shows while taking us round his collection, it also featured interviews with his son **Ditmar** and with **Annet Duller**. They talked about the live music, how **Herman** focussed on the whole performance, sequences and audience experience given his theatrical background, and some of the difficulties of working with **Herman**.

John Townsend then took us to the 59th *Bièvres International Photographic*



Two slides by Graystone Bird of Bath



assistant. We saw some wonderful and varied examples of **Graystone Bird's** slides from **Andrew's** own and **Lester Smith's** collections. These included examples from the 1906 rural genre series (photographed in **Castle Combe**), fishermen in **Whitby**, seaside scenes in **St Ives**, early aviation at **Brooklands**, people having fun and children in various settings. Among the latter were pictures of **Graystone Bird's** son **Frederick**, known as 'Gray' (born 1903), usually with a mischievous look on his face. The last known advert for the business was in 1931 and it closed in 1939. **Graystone Bird** died in 1943 but his son **Gray** became a successful press photographer.

Next **Martin Gilbert** introduced us to a box of slides he bought at an antiques fair in the Netherlands about 20 years ago. Although at first, as a furniture restorer, he was excited by the very fine box, the contents proved even more remarkable. These early slides were a mix of vertical and horizontal, slipping and panoramic as well as a number of long slides with five images that told a story. Of interest too was that they were mounted in a wider variety of woods than normally found, including poplar and teak. **Martin** then called on **Michael van de Leur** with his knowledge of Dutch history and politics to help identify some of the subjects. On the



Martin's lantern show slide: (left) watching the show (the 'projected images' changed) and (above) the lanternist being paid



Bièvres International Photographic Fair

Fair that takes place in France every year. On sale are old cameras, stereo views and viewers, photographs, etc., together with magic lanterns and optical toys. John has been going for about 40 years and has met up with many familiar MLS faces there. Although the prices are eye-watering (such as £16k for a Chinese lantern, £68k for a painting of a lanternist) he highly recommended the experience. His and Martin Gilbert's photographs of the event were beautifully put together by Martin's daughter Emily.

Dick Moore sent a presentation of the ten Carpenter and Westley slides of Charles Bennett's shadows (see *TML* 35) accompanied by the 1927 recording of 'Me and My Shadow' by Dave Dreyer, Al Jolson and Billy Rose, sung by 'Whispering' Jack Smith. Following that Theresa Simkin showed us her two related books (see p. 2).



John Gilpin's eventful ride

Lester Smith then showed us some unusual mechanical slides from his collection starting with some curtain slides including a W.C. Hughes 'Presto' slide that operated a curtain mechanism on two consecutive slides – but was reluctant to work properly on the day. He then projected a lovely dancing sailor choreutoscope and finished with Muybridge's trotting horse.

Fresh from photographing 11,000 slides in four days from Pat and Ray Gilbert's collection for the *Lucerna* database, Richard Crangle showed us how to spot some of the clues in slide sets to identify who made the slide and the set itself. In cataloguing the Gilbert slides Richard realised that he already has some reference to about 85 per cent of British slide sets in *Lucerna*. Clues include the trademark (although this may be the retailer not maker), style of the labelling and typeface, style of the image, locations used (sometimes spotting tiny details such as number of bricks!), people who appear regularly and title slide style. He looked at slides from well-known makers such as York & Son and Bamforth & Co. as well as less well-known makers such as Thomas Wing, William Rider and the Piggott brothers.



After the extraordinary tale of his railway investigation to identify a long-vanished part of King's Cross Station in London, Richard showed the sort of information to be found on *Lucerna* and how to use it.

Lester Smith then projected his beautiful 12-slide Carpenter and Westley set of *Who Killed Cock Robin?* The detail in these hand-painted slides of this sad tale was stunning, enabling all the different birds to be easily identified.

After a wonderful strawberries and cream tea Gwen Sebus started the 'Bring and Show' section with a slide showing a fine display of hats. Richard Rigby then showed his lantern slides made from colour laser prints to illustrate his talks about Medical Detection Dogs (he admitted to having a new-fangled electronic device too). Kevin Varty showed an interesting set of WWI French slides about submarines that appeared to be printed on tissue paper. These included subjects such as battery operated mines, air tanks and concluded with the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German submarine – the reason Kevin had bought the set.



The day ended with an extraordinary show of dissolving views by Martin Gilbert. After the 'Welcome' slide probably featuring W.C. Hughes (see *TML* 31) he began with some recently reunited sets (see *TML* 32). We then went on a continental tour starting in Switzerland with alpine scenes and a disastrous carriage ride through the mountains. A scene from *Manfred* (poem by Lord Byron, 1816-17) featuring the witch of the Alps, was followed by Castle Chillon by day and moonlight, then inside to see the *Prisoner of Chillon* (also Byron, 1816) illuminated by a beam of sunlight. After Vesuvius erupting and the Grand Canal in Venice, by day and night, we saw a lake scene with moonlight, harp-playing angel and rowing boat – all moving. Going home by ship, the seasick passenger missed wonderful sights going past his porthole. The ship sailed through the day and night with the sea and sky changing into a rich variety of sumptuous colours.

Two of Martin's slides – Castle Chillon at the top

THE MAGIC LANTERN is edited, designed and produced by Mary Ann Auckland and Gwen Sebus, assisted by Richard Crangle and George Auckland.

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Printed by Stormpress, Exeter – www.stormpress.co.uk

Published by:

The Magic Lantern Society
17 Dean Street
Exeter EX2 4HH, UK

www.magiclantern.org.uk

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ISSN 2057-3723



Recollections of Trafalgar (the picture in the frame changed)

After various other nautical scenes that included a lighthouse with moving beam, we had the pirate sequence featured on the front of *TML* 34 and finally *Recollections of Trafalgar* with an old veteran showing images passing through an ornate picture frame to two very young onlookers in sailor suits (left). What a stunning finale!