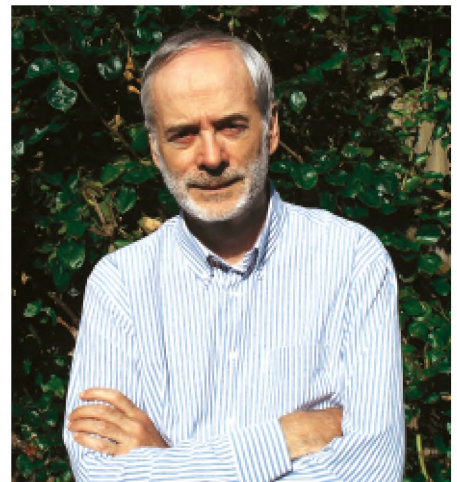


OBITUARY

STEPHEN HERBERT (1951-2023)

In *TML* 36 we announced the very sad news that long-time MLS member Stephen Herbert had died in September 2023. Stephen was born in south London in December 1951. His father Albert was a factory worker and mother Betty a nursery nurse. After attending Bec Grammar School in Tooting, his first job was as a projectionist at the Imperial Cinema in Battersea – an experience he has talked about at MLS meetings. He became an audio-visual technician at Wandsworth Technical College (1973-79) and then film production technical supervisor at Goldsmiths' College (1979-89). In 1989 he joined the National Film Theatre cinema (later known as BFI Southbank), later becoming Head of Technical Services. In this role he oversaw projection at the National Film Theatre and London Film Festival, one of the world's leading cinémathèques, projecting film formats from 8mm to 70mm. He also managed the technical operations at BFI's much-missed Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI) where magic lantern and working optical toys, including zoetropes and praxinoscopes, were on display and where he organised innovative shows of great MLS interest. In 1996 he co-edited, with Luke McKernan, a reference work *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema*, published by the BFI and then put online.



In 1994 Stephen and his partner Mo Heard set up The Projection Box, publishing books about optical devices, projectors and pioneers from the invention of the magic lantern to early cinema. Examples include Stephen's study of Wordsworth Donisthorpe, *Industry, Liberty and a Vision*:

Wordsworth Donisthorpe's Kinesigraph (1998) and Mervyn Heard's *Phantasmagoria: The secret life of the magic lantern* (2006). They later moved, with the publishing operation, to Hastings, Sussex.

At this time Stephen was the MLS Research Officer – a post he held from 1989 to 2001 – and added a great deal to the understanding of how magic lanterns and related technologies evolved and worked. Harnessing the expertise of other members, he led a number of projects but generally they would agree that they learnt more from him than vice versa.

In later years his knowledge and expertise was sought out by academics, museums, programme makers and film directors. He was a visiting research fellow at Kingston University, drawing on his understanding of Eadweard Muybridge, and a technical consultant on Martin Scorsese's film *Hugo* (2011) about Georges Méliès.

He was well known for reconstructing early technologies including the zoopraxiscope (*TML* 18) and 'Chinese fireworks' (*TML* 20), as well as pinball machines and model aeroplanes. Whenever he spoke at the MLS, we all learnt something new. Altogether he gave presentations at 19 MLS meetings between 1986 and 2019, contributed 16 articles to our journals and books, and co-edited three of the Society's most influential books – *Magic Images* (1990), *Servants of Light* (1997), and the *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern* (2001). He will be greatly missed for his extraordinary knowledge and expertise, and for many other reasons too, as the following contributions show.



Stephen with a disc from his zoopraxiscope at the MLS meeting in January 2019

MO HEARD writes

Stephen and I met at MOMI where he was Head of Technical Services for the Museum and the National Film Theatre, and I was the Actors' Company Manager. As I knew a little about magic lanterns and optical toys – I had known Marguerite Fawdry of Pollock's Toy Museum for many years – I was happy to be introduced to the MLS by Stephen. I remember the early meetings at the film museum in Bradford, the Architectural Association in London, and Lacock Abbey.

During the 1990s we were involved in the centenary of cinema and we were bursting with ideas for promoting pre-cinema media. We created thaumatropes, a box of flip books and reproductions of Victorian toys for sale in the MOMI shop. We were excited to start our publishing venture, The Projection Box; our first book was the slim volume *When the Movies Began*. Stephen had a background in producing books and magazines in the 1970s and 1980s, and he was adept at designing pages, working on 'the kitchen table'. We chose MLS member Peter Gillies to be our printer for all of our publications.

Stephen was fascinated by technology, and he became an expert on projection. He could fix old machines, he knew about every early manufacturer of projectors and lanterns, and studied histories of the pioneers. He wanted to know how things worked, which meant that he was able to restore old mechanical pinball machines, knew the intricacies of the mutoscope and kinoscope. How many other people could describe Reynaud's Praxinoscope in detail or make the picture bands? He was the world expert on Eadweard Muybridge's

Zoopraxiscope. His knowledge of the machine led him to build one recently from Meccano! This has been donated to Kingston Museum. Stephen had so many interests, but he was no dilettante. He researched everything, thus becoming somewhat of an expert in the subjects he was passionate about. A true polymath.

He hated superficial information he found on the internet and, in wanting people to receive the correct facts, he created his websites *The Compleat Muybridge* and the extraordinary *Wheel of Life*. When Stephen was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2019, he entered into a period of feverish writing, often getting up at 2am due to some manic brain reaction to post-operative drugs he reckoned, and writing for two hours, for example reviewing Ian Christie's book *Robert Paul and the Origins of British Cinema*.

The result was Stephen's superb blog *The Optilogue: Studies in Popular Optical Media* which was created in December 2020 with help from Richard Crangle. In the subsequent two-and-a-half years, there were over 60 posts on a wide range of subjects from rare Belgian magic lantern slides to flip books, from toy projectors to children's 1950s photographic books (www.optilogue.wordpress.com). Watch his videos on his YouTube channel (@horipet/playlists) and you'll realise what a clever man he was – showing how to repair a broken book, mend a pinball machine, carve a Carmen Miranda string puppet or build model aeroplanes. Stephen shone a light on the mysteries of optical media history and its inventors: now we have missed the opportunity of reading what he had planned to write about next.

PETER GILLIES writes

When I joined the MLS many years ago I heard the name Stephen Herbert on occasions but there never seemed to be a face to fit the name. I had the good fortune to visit MOMI before it closed (what a tragedy) and that soon triggered the connection. Soon after this I purchased a pair of lanterns which required a box both to carry them in and to place them on when projecting. I scoured the few books I had but could find nothing that helped. Somehow I knew roughly what I was looking for, maybe remembering an exhibit in MOMI. My first actual contact with Stephen was to catch him at a meeting and ask about the exhibit as a possible source of information for me to make a replacement box.

Clearly he immediately understood my predicament and offered to arrange a visit. It didn't take long before we met and to my astonishment the piece was dismantled and the box brought outside the glass cabinet. The public tripped over and around me whilst I measured every detail and recorded it all on a scrappy piece of paper. Looking back I cannot imagine a better welcome, more help and encouragement, provided with enthusiasm.

All this happened around the time Stephen moved from London to Hastings – he had fallen in love with the seaside resort where his

DEAC ROSSELL writes

Always generous with his time and his incomparable knowledge, Stephen Herbert never bragged about his work, he just did it. So I heard almost nothing about the scale or the progress of the 'Race to Cinema' project, a years-long undertaking that constructed meticulous copies of pioneering, experimental moving picture cameras by figures like William Friese-Greene, Augustin le Prince and Léon Bouly. Stephen was the historian and practical cameraman. The aim was to run film through each replica camera, and see how it actually worked, providing evidence to place its designer in the parade of moving picture experimenters. Unaware of this extended project, I was astonished one day to receive a report on a late addition to the project, the early 1895 camera of the American pioneer Robert Dempsey Gray, a figure valued by Henry Hopwood in 1899, but now virtually unknown, whom I had been championing for the last couple of years. I was especially pleased to see that Gray's camera was actually a practical apparatus.

Nor did I hear anything at all about Stephen's work on a film museum in Qatar until it was over, or his auction room actions for other buyers, and only gradual hints about model airplane flying. On the other hand, I wrote my only article on the Kingston photographer Eadweard Muybridge at Stephen's request. There was an international symposium on the relationship of Muybridge with the chronophotographer Étienne-Jules Marey scheduled in Marey's home town of Beaune, France at the end of the week, and one of the panelists, historian Brian Coe, had had a stroke. Stephen couldn't travel that week, so he asked if I could write something on Muybridge over the next two



The MLS Research Group in 1994 – Stephen is far left (above)

Stephen Herbert at the MLS Convention in April 1993 (right)



childhood holidays were enjoyed and remembered. This was only about 45 minutes by car from me so I saw more of him and discovered the breadth of his knowledge – it took only a simple question to trigger all the facts. During the period of our relationship he was never a collector in the true sense, although he might have been guilty of a lifetime of hoarding. There were always pictures, writings, letters, books, etc., to help explain the story he was telling. The final quality he had in abundance was generosity and assistance with no idea of personal gain.

As our relationship developed I came to know Stephen as a man with many interests, including anything that had any relevance to magic lanterns and lanternists at all. However, model balsa wood planes were regularly researched, made and flown and in later times pinball machines were obtained and repaired.

Stephen started a small publishing company, The Projection Box, producing both books of note and small booklets on a variety of subjects. At the time Delia and I were running a small printing company. Stephen entrusted his artwork to us to produce them ready for sale. He never hesitated to be ambitious when the work called for it. I daresay he thought the challenge – and head scratching – would do me no harm. We found him a gentle unassuming man whom it was a pleasure to know, a sorrow to lose and very difficult, if not impossible, to replace.

days and deliver it in Beaune on the third day.

Without quite the same deadlines, when Martin Loiperdinger sent me an odd sketch made by British film pioneer Birt Acres in June 1895 and asked what kind of apparatus was being represented, I called Stephen. After a day together, we worked out that this was Acres's first sketch of his *Elektroskop*. Later research proved this was correct, thanks to Stephen's knowledge and experience. As always with good friends, our interchanges went both ways, and nobody was counting. It was an honest surprise, although not unique, when a copy of *Evolution of the Cinematograph*, a 100-page catalogue written by Stephen and Pierre Pateau arrived one day in 2014. Based on two volumes of early cinema clippings bought at auction, this was a record of the objects and promoted their resale, 'for private circulation'.

Since Stephen and I shared a critical view of Jonathan Crary's theorizing, I was less surprised by Stephen's proposed article disputing Crary's mis-interpretations of Reynaud's Praxinoscope and the *Pantomimes Lumineuses* exhibited in Paris. Stephen asked me for comments but, as far as I know, the article was never published. Nor was a more recent draft essay in 2018, written by Stephen at the request of a professor at the University of Plymouth that minutely examined various types of moving images, giving an appropriate category to all known practitioners. This was, it seemed to me, Stephen's extension of John Barnes's lantern slide classifications in *Magic Images*. Even in its incomplete draft form, this was an heroic attempt to find a universal theory of moving images, but it also never appeared in print as the professor's book changed course. Also not in print was an autobiography that Stephen worked on a few years ago.

Stephen was especially proud of his work on a project with an international group about the career and experiments of Leeds pioneer Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince. Despite a recent book on Le Prince by Paul Fischer (*The Man Who Invented Motion Pictures*, 2022) Stephen was meeting the group online every week, meetings he kept up right to the end, and when I visited him at an NHS facility a few days before he died, he was pleased to report that their findings were now being written up. One of the participants had discovered significant new facts about Le Prince: "I can't tell you what they are," Stephen enunciated clearly, "I promised not to tell anyone." That was Stephen Herbert.

SEOYOUNG KIM writes

I first met Stephen in 2016, and he quickly became an important person in my life as a friend and mentor. Like many Muybridge researchers, I greatly benefited from Stephen's seminal work on the pioneering photographer, Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904). Stephen always generously shared his time and knowledge with me. I am so grateful for his support and interest in my work over the years. On behalf of Kingston Museum, I am also indebted to Stephen for his contribution in researching and raising the profile of Kingston Museum's Muybridge Collection. Thank you, Stephen. I will miss you.
Seoyoung Kim is a Curator at Kingston Museum

RICHARD CRANGLE writes

At my first MLS meeting in 1992, a wide-eyed young(ish) researcher, I was bewildered by all the wonderful visual stuff suddenly in front of me. Where to begin? Who should I talk to? Then the Society's Research Officer stood up to announce a coming MOMI event. Ah, I thought, you're someone I need to get to know. How right I was.

Stephen and I worked together on many projects – arranging the Bill Douglas Centre exhibits, wrestling the *Encyclopaedia* to a standstill, and more recently his remarkable blog *The Optilogue*, for which (like Stephen himself) the word 'eclectic' doesn't get anywhere close... Working on projects like those can be stressful, but the delights of working with Stephen were his air of calm, his endless talent for finding practical answers, and his personification of 'grace under pressure'.

A conversation with Stephen was always something of a learning experience, but it never felt like being 'taught'. His knowledge and range of interests would often surprise me, and always give me new things to think about. Generous with his time and thoughts, he was always interested in what everyone else was doing, always ready with sound advice, and just damn good fun to be around.

JEREMY BROOKER writes

I have so many happy memories of Stephen Herbert. Visiting him and Mo at their home in the picturesque Old Town in Hastings. Working together on the BBC documentary *Mechanical Monsters*, exploring the technology behind Robert Paul's proposed collaboration with H.G. Wells (first broadcast in August 2018 and currently available in the dark recesses of *YouTube*). Wrestling with Nick Hiley and Lester Smith in an attempt to bring life to Nick's newly-acquired c.1906 Hepworth film projector. A gathering at my house with Mervyn Heard, David Francis and other magic lantern luminaries, all entranced by Robert Poulter's model theatre performance. But what I most associate with Stephen is his wonderful sense of humour. Recounting with boyish glee the days and weeks he spent building his latest model aeroplane, the brief joy as it sailed into the heavens, and the inevitable devastation as it plunged back to earth in a heap of splintered balsawood. But perhaps my favourite Stephen Herbert joke was told to me by Nick Hiley, and presupposes a familiarity with the world of Victorian optical toys. A slipping slide depicts a maid sticking her head out of a manhole in front of a grand house. A policeman crawls along the pavement to plant a kiss on her upturned lips. "Ah", said Stephen, "the Fanny-Kissed-a-Cop".

LESTER SMITH writes

Stephen Herbert was good friend – and we had a lot in common including many interests. Together in 1990 we set up the special exhibition 'The Art and Artistry of the Lanternist' at MOMI on London's South Bank, which went on display from 15 May to 29 July. We had 18 special wooden cabinets made to display the large quantity of lantern



*Nick Hiley:
"Stephen once sent me this photograph of him projecting with a Butcher's 'Empire No.2' film projector, at some unspecified date"*

slides in the exhibition. Together we overcame problems like heat and humidity which Stephen cured by placing basins of water under the display cabinets.

Together we visited St Ives to see John Barnes and his collection of cinema and lantern material, and other optical devices, as well as his enormous collection of books, many written by himself. The Barnes brothers (identical twins) William (Bill) and John were amazing characters. Although Bill lived in Parsons Green, London, they kept in touch daily with each other. Occasionally, we all got together in London for invigorating discussions.

Throughout his long illness Stephen never lost his sense of purpose. Indeed he invented an almost regular periodical, the *Optilogue*, and he once told me that his brain had cleared so much that he could remember details of his childhood. Mo Heard's wonderful photo (at the beginning of this obituary) shows him as a deep thinker and extraordinary man. I and many others will miss him tremendously.

NICK HILEY writes

A few days ago I was in a junk shop, looking through a pile of copies of the *English Mechanic* and the *Model Engineer and Electrician*, from the 1890s and 1900s. As I looked through the articles on new technology I kept thinking "I must tell Stephen about this", and then remembered that, sadly, after thirty years, this would no longer be possible. The late Victorians and Edwardians were fascinated by inventions, and by the new technology that was transforming their lives. At home this included snapshot cameras, phonographs and gramophones; at work it meant electric light, typewriters and telephones; and in the wider world it brought moving pictures, aeroplanes and motor cars. All these shaped their lives and determined their history, but the number of people who now understand that technology, and keep alive the thrill of its evolution, is small and, sadly, dwindling. Stephen had a deep understanding of it, which in the case of magic lanterns, moving picture cameras and projectors, grew from a lifetime of collecting, handling, dismantling, restoring and operating them, in a way that is now hard for anyone to emulate. I miss him a great deal, and his passing has left a gap in the history of our times.

GEORGE AUCKLAND writes

I got to know Stephen well when he ran the Research Group for the MLS and I went to some of the meetings. Sometime later he asked if I would be interested in creating a website for the Society. At that time I was running a section of BBC Online, so I knew a fair bit about websites. Taking some advice on the graphic design, I did indeed create the first MLS website in 1998 – and all because of Stephen's friendly prompting.

More recently we decided to interview Bill Barnes, and Stephen not only made all the arrangements with Bill but also acted as the interviewer, as he knew Bill so well. The result is a charming in-depth conversation about the Barnes brothers, their lives and times.