

SPRING MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

BIRMINGHAM AND MIDLAND INSTITUTE, BIRMINGHAM, UK

Saturday 13 April 2024

Chair Richard Feltham welcomed an audience of around 50 members to the large theatre at the BMI. We were delighted to see a strong contingent from across the Channel. The theme for the morning was World War 1. Richard began proceedings with a series of YMCA slides of cartoons by Bruce Bairnsfather (1887-1959), who served at the front. Some of these featured his most famous creation 'Old Bill', a middle-aged Cockney soldier. The cartoons were published in *The Bystander*, a weekly tabloid magazine that ran from 1903 to 1940. Much of the humour was fairly grim and ironic.



Bairnsfather's WW1 humour

array of strange creatures going past a window and then bowing his head, and finally three street panoramas. The first of these showed merchants and people in the street including a mother and children, and a man in a bowler hat! The next was probably a funeral parade but each face was intricately different. The final slide was a brightly-coloured boat and lantern festival. Jeremy then set the scene of the western obsession with all things Japanese in the 1880s (for example, Gilbert and Sullivan's very successful *Mikado*) and introduced us to Henry Underhill (1855-1920) an amateur scientist and artist from Oxford who ran a grocery business and helped to found the Oxfordshire Natural History Society. He made his own magic lantern slides and gave shows to children for the Band of Hope. These included his own version of some Japanese folktales published in Japan as books on handmade paper for western sales. The set Jeremy showed was *The Tongue-Cut Sparrow* painted in July/August 1889 – a tale about a sparrow that sang for an old couple who fed it, but their neighbour cut the sparrow's tongue. The old couple visited the sparrow's home and went home with a basket of never-ending treasure but, when the neighbour visited, her basket contained devils who tore her to pieces.



After lunch Michael and Andy Spencer, with Zoe Toft and Phill Henderson at the piano treated us to a nautical feast including slipping slides, dissolving views, mechanical effects and long slides. We saw calm waters and stormy seas, lighthouses, ships swaying in the moonlight, a dramatic 'ship on fire' sequence, a whaling scene, yachts and much more. We met *Our Life-Boat Men* (with Zoe singing 'Eternal Father Strong to Save') and went for a holiday by the seaside ('I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside' – of course). The show was accompanied throughout by a rich variety of nautical music, from sea shanties and the 'Sailor's Hornpipe' to Smetana's *Má Vlast* and appropriate sound effects. A crab with a face and spectacles drew the feast to a close.

Following that Lester Smith showed us a selection of mostly comic sets. He started with a bull interrupting a football match and being recaptured after scoring a goal. Other delights included the cats Dilly and Dolly being caught stealing milk, an elephant flushing coconut-throwing monkeys out of a tree with spray from its trunk, and Mr Snapshot who went to any lengths for a photograph. We then had a circus elephant and clowns skipping, a serenader singing under the wrong window and ending up wet, and camel-riding Jack who inevitably fell off. Following this were photographs of unusual musicians, some with bagpipe variations, the story of three



Our Chair is also a member of the Magic Waistcoat Society



A nautical feast – and a stormy sea





Bamforth & Co. keep the home fires burning in their own distinctive style

rotund gentlemen who ended up in a heap at a photographer's, and finally *Old Mother Hubbard* with 'reading' provided by the audience (mainly **Richard Rigby**).

The second 'Bring and Show' session began with **Keith Uttridge** projecting five slides from a Bamforth song set of *Keep the Home Fires Burning* that came from the late Mervyn Heard. The last known Bamforth slide catalogue was issued in 1914, but this song was not written until May 1915. However the slides were typical Bamforth quality; **Stan Roberts** led us in singing the chorus. **Gwen Sebus** showed two slides – 'Spotted Babe of Peru' (a York & Son slipping slide) and a mother frog washing her offspring. Martin Gilbert showed a video of a 1903 Kinora reel produced by Regent Street Studios depicting a shadow show.

Richard Feltham finished the session with some French educational long slides of engineering subjects, including a magic lantern, but unfortunately one of them was glued in a picture frame, which somewhat limited the options for projecting it.

Next **James Burgess** told us more about his rediscovery of the magic lantern (see *TML* 36, p. 6). The grandson of the late MLS members Thelma and John Burgess, James had owned a magic lantern since age 10 but it was unused and gathering dust. In summer 2021 his theatre company, the Duston Players, were searching for a way to reopen after the pandemic hiatus, with no budget (so no set or costumes) and everyone out of practice at learning lines. The solution – a magic lantern show! He found a set of *A Christmas Carol* among his grandfather's slides and borrowed slides from other sets that worked with the story, making a total of 27 possible slides ... for up to two hours of performance. So James, a sculptor, set about drawing slides using coloured pencils to fill gaps in the story and ended up with 50 slides. The show was a great success and was followed by *Alice in Wonderland* (with puppets, piano and sound effects), with *Gabriel Grub* coming soon. James then pondered why a magic lantern belongs in a theatre. The answer that he came up with: it's live, intimate, versatile and historical, as well as cheap and fun!



Tiny Tim – will he live? One of James's original slides for A Christmas Carol



Man tries to amputate his own foot

Lester then returned to shed light on the hidden meanings of some slipping slides. These included a politician based on a well-known engraving, a small pig biting a clergyman on the nose at a dinner table (the smallest pig in a litter, traditionally given to the local parson, was known as the 'parson's pig') and two flowers – the passion flower and Turk's head – both with appropriate human heads appearing. Two versions of a man chopping at his own foot symbolised the deeply divisive Corn Laws in force between 1815 and 1845. A double-slipper of the 'Fakenham Ghost' in Norfolk was based on Robert Bloomfield's poem in *Rural Tales* (1802). A homophone – 'granny dear' and 'grenadier' – was the basis for another, and a tailor emerging from a cabbage was a visual pun on the term 'cabbage' for left-over fabric that the tailor could keep.

The finale to the day was a show by **Sergi Buka** and **Martin Gilbert**. First came the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale *The Frog Prince* narrated, by coincidence, by ... **Frog Morris**! This Life Model tale of the king's youngest daughter reluctantly

taking on a frog companion, who turns into a handsome prince, was expanded and concluded with a wonderful series of long slides depicting the parade of coaches, horses and attendants returning the prince and his bride to his home country. Sergi then performed some amazing, mind-boggling rope tricks with **Phill** at the piano. Martin projected more illusions via the magic lantern with circling heads, soldiers turning into horses and wizards conjuring up fairies, strange creatures and skulls. A sequence of legendary knights – a few rising from the dead – was followed by some beautiful changing flowers and a 'Good Night' chromatrope drawing our proceedings to a close.



Man amazes audience with rope-based illusionism

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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The three finale-ists: (left to right) Sergi Buka, Martin Gilbert and Frog Morris take a well-earned rest