The Magic Lantern

THE FIRES OF LONDON

Part 1. The Cheapside Fire

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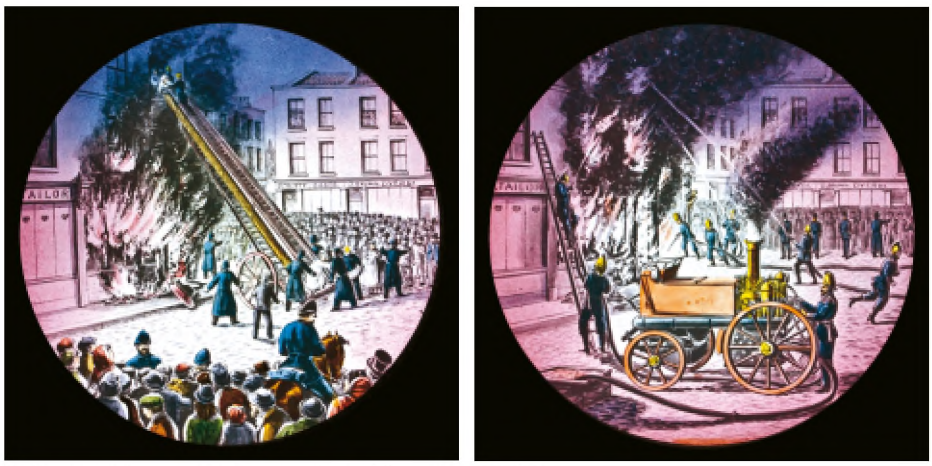
Destruction by fire is something the magic lantern does rather well. A short sequence of dissolving views can take us from the unsuspecting comfort of 'before' to the alarming devastation of 'after', often enlivened by realistic effects of smoke and flames. Like the passing of the seasons or the transition from day to night, dissolving views here represent the passage of time. But while the cycles of nature suggest ordered transformation, with perhaps a degree of detachment, fire introduces an altogether less reassuring message. Here is a chaos which undermines our sense of an ordered universe.

A typical fire sequence begins with a peaceful street scene by day, with passers-by going about their everyday business. Night falls and a wisp of smoke appears, which soon develops into a blazing inferno. But wait! Rescue is at hand. The noble firefighters arrive with their gleaming steam-powered engines. Fig. 1 shows just such a sequence, with an apparently realistic street scene by day, then tinged with the dark hues of night and lastly ablaze with lurid red flames. There are, however, some strong clues that this is not the representation of a real event. For example, the shop signs (Messrs Cotton the draper, Crusty the baker and Brown the dyer) offer an unlikely coincidence of names and trades. And we are left wondering – what happened next? Was the fire eventually brought under control? Could poor Mr Cotton's home and livelihood be saved? Or did the fire spread uncontrollably, consuming the whole picturesque town in a rampage of apocalyptic flame?



1. House on fire – a dissolve sequence of four slides, maker unknown (Brooker Collection)

Another category of slides represents actual historical events of national, sometimes international, significance. A Newton slide catalogue from 1899 lists the Tower of London fire in 1841 ('Day, Moonlight, on Fire, rackwork effect') and no fewer than three significant fires from 1871 – the burning of Warwick castle; the destruction of the Hotel de Ville during the Paris Commune; and the great Chicago Fire ('complete with American engine and fireman').[1]

Of greater interest here are depictions of more everyday buildings – factories, shops and private dwellings of no particular significance in themselves but whose destruction by fire threatened devastation on an unimaginable scale. As recent events in Los Angeles have reminded us, the latest firefighting equipment and the bravery of firefighters are no match for the combined forces of nature. In an age when steam boilers powered everything from manufacture to transportation, and homes were heated with burning coals and lit by gas mantles, it is small wonder that our forebears had an acute awareness of the ever-present dangers of fire. And of all the fires in Victorian London, perhaps none proved more ideally suited to representation through the magic lantern than the Cheapside Fire of 1881.

Cheapside is one of the great thoroughfares in the old City of London, a site of commerce and the transportation of goods for centuries. It is an area which has been devastated and rebuilt many times, most notably after the Great Fire of London in 1666 and in bombing raids during WW2. Not to mention the rapacious demands of property speculation in the post-War years.

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2. (left) Cheapside c.1660 before the Great Fire of London. Magic lantern slide (Brooker Collection)
3. (middle) Cheapside c.1890. Magic lantern slide (Brooker Collection)
4. (above) From Cannon Street, looking towards Cheapside after WW2. Postcard (Brooker Collection)

5. Illustrated London News*, 10 September 1881, pp.261-62 (Brooker Collection)*
6. Penny Illustrated Paper*, 10 September 1881, pp.167-69 (Brooker Collection)*

A similarly catastrophic destruction was avoided on 1 September 1881 when a fire took hold of a house on the corner of Cheapside and the narrow thoroughfare of Bread Street. A rather sober account and accompanying engraving (Fig. 5) which sets the scene appeared in the *Illustrated London News (ILN)* just a few days later.[2] The property was newly built, with the lower floors occupied by a merchant in wine, spirits and tea, Messrs T. Foster and Co., and the upper part by a glove manufactory. The cause of the fire was said to be the actions of a gas fitter examining a meter on the second floor; according to one account, "incautiously testing an escape of Gas with a lighted candle in his hand."[3] The flames soon spread to the property on the opposite corner of Bread Street, occupied by a manufacturer of India rubber. With so many combustible materials involved it is small wonder that neither fire could be extinguished, and both buildings were gutted from floor to roof. Fortunately, methods of construction using stone façades and iron girders left both structures standing and the fire was largely contained.

A more compelling account was published on the same day by the *ILN*'s more populist contemporary, the *Penny Illustrated Paper*.[4] This image (Fig. 6) was not an attempt to capture a specific moment in the fire's progress but represented the whole course of the drama. The engraving vividly depicts the potential danger of the fire, fanned by a strong breeze which might well have swept the flames onwards towards St Mary-le-Bow Church. To the left, we see the firemen turning their hoses on the unruly crowds who had come to gawp at the spectacle before police reinforcements could be summoned. In the centre is firefighter Wheatley, who was crushed in a fall of masonry. It is also possible to pick out the brave firemen who climbed onto the roof of the India rubber warehouse with fire hoses, directing their jets of water into the conflagration from above.

7. Advertisement for Foster's – Wine, Spirit and Tea Merchants
8. The Graphic*, 17 September 1881, p.309*

It is probable that both these scenes were based on a photograph, or photographs, taken after the fire had been extinguished, with graphic artists creating compelling images from what were by then charred remains. Though stark and impressive, such photographs of the aftermath would lack the drama and excitement of an event apparently unfolding before our own eyes.

A similar photograph was used in an advertisement for Foster's (Fig. 7), the unfortunate wine merchants. With the ruined building shown on one side and accounts of the fire on the other, this macabre keepsake was sold for one shilling and served to inform customers that business continued at their new temporary premises "during the re-building".[5] The photograph is credited to the London Stereoscopic Company (LSC), and it seems probable that this image was originally part of a stereoscopic pair. It is deliberately taken from an oblique angle to maximise the three-dimensional effect, with the camera roughly level with the third floor rather than at ground level. In fact, the LSC had a close interest. Though its main premises were in Oxford Street, they also had a branch in the City of London at 54 Cheapside – almost opposite the blaze – explaining why their photographer might wish to find an ideal viewing point from a near neighbour's premises, and why this particular fire was considered worthy of commemoration. This same photograph was also adapted and as engraving in *The Graphic* (Fig. 8).[6]

Appearing more than a fortnight after the fire, *The Graphic* had no need to depict this as a contemporaneous event but even so, the image was substantially altered for dramatic effect. We see

9. Fire in Cheapside*, W.C. Hughes magic lantern slides (Brooker Collection)*

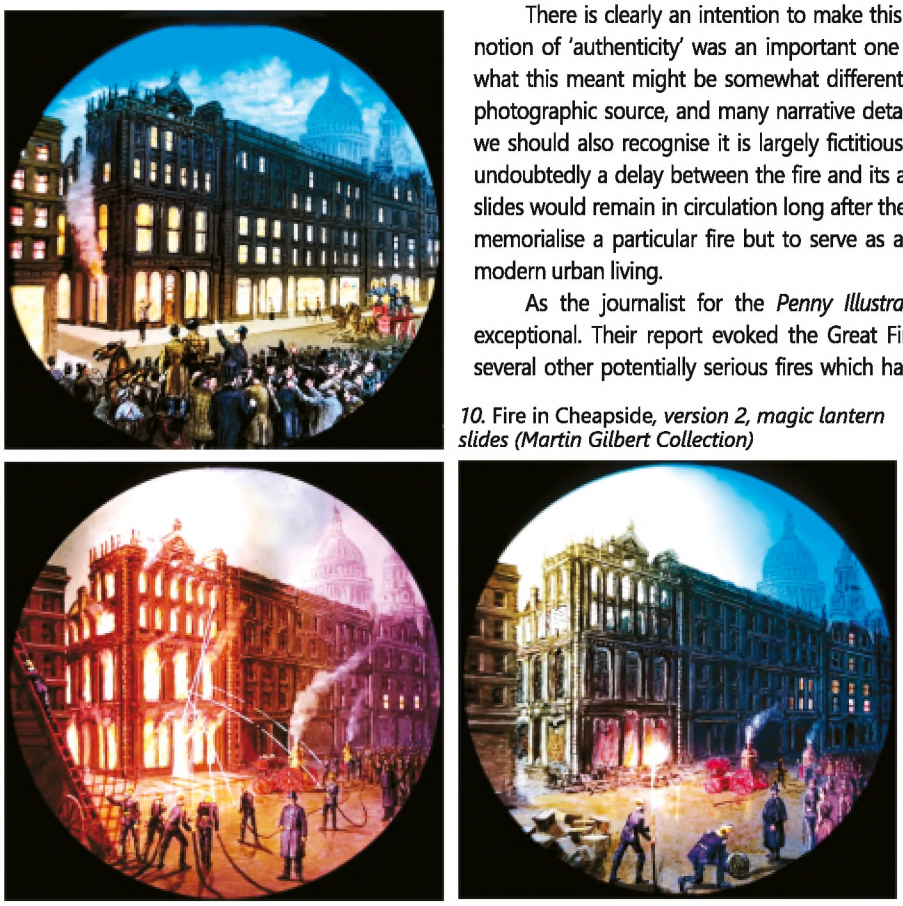
firefighters still at work putting out the remnants of the fire and the point of view has been shifted, as if the viewer was now at street level looking up at the devastation. Yet if we compare the top floors of the original photograph with the engraving, they are virtually unaltered. The apparent change of perspective is only applied to the lower storeys.

THE CHEAPSIDE FIRE ON SCREEN

The Newton catalogue mentioned above also lists a dissolving view set titled *Fire in Cheapside*, comprising three slides and a rackwork effect. This rather superior production cost an eye-watering £6 15s. By comparison, the four slides of the Tower of London fire cost just £1 7s. 6d.

The slides illustrated here (Fig. 9) are labelled 'W.C. Hughes'; a quick comparison shows that they were based on the same source image as Figs 7 and 8. However, the requirements and conventions of slide production have led to many significant alterations, and it is worth taking a moment to consider the thinking behind these. The burning building is recognisably the one photographed by the LSC. This may be responsible for the strange perspective at the lower left-hand side of Foster's premises, and the skewed position of the India rubber warehouse at the extreme left-hand side, which appears be set forward of the parade of shops. We can compare the principal architectural features, especially the distinctive roofline. The names of the individual retailers can just be made out above their shopfronts.

We also see parts of the fire's development. Although the Foster company premises remain the primary focus, we see firefighters at work on the building at the left-hand side, which would become the secondary seat of the fire. We even see a puff of smoke emerging from the second floor, just where we know the unfortunate gas fitter had been at work; the starting point from which the drama unfolds.



10. Fire in Cheapside*, version 2, magic lantern slides (Martin Gilbert Collection)*

There is clearly an intention to make this a truthful representation of an actual event. The notion of 'authenticity' was an important one to our Victorian forebears, though their idea of what this meant might be somewhat different from our own. This is an image derived from a photographic source, and many narrative details are true to events as they occurred. However, we should also recognise it is largely fictitious. After all, this is not news reportage. There was undoubtedly a delay between the fire and its appearance in lantern slide catalogues, and these slides would remain in circulation long after the fire itself was forgotten. The purpose was not to memorialise a particular fire but to serve as an archetype for the kind of dangers inherent in modern urban living.

As the journalist for the *Penny Illustrated Paper* pointed out, this fire was far from exceptional. Their report evoked the Great Fire of London 215 years earlier and highlighted several other potentially serious fires which had occurred in London in just the previous week. Like all journalists, then as now, they claimed a high moral purpose. "[In] publishing this illustration of the kind of conflagration which may burst out at any moment in the City of London", they were simply alerting citizens to the regular dangers they faced and the inadequacies of the institutions set up to protect them.

The lantern slides were meant to serve a similar exemplary role (playing on the fears of city dwellers), but without the benefit of an accompanying text. The slides had to embody the entire narrative in purely visual form, leading the slide artist to make perhaps his boldest decision. To physically locate the event in the minds of his viewers he

11. Fire in Cheapside*, version 3, magic lantern slides (Martin Gilbert Collection)*

introduced not one, but two, prominent London landmarks which were not present in the source material. The distinctive dome of St Paul's Cathedral towers over the scene. Though roughly in the correct position in relation to Cheapside this is an improbable view – certainly from street level. Even more impossible is the spire of another Wren church, St Mary-le-Bow. This should be some 300 metres away from St Paul's and to the **left** of the fire (see Fig. 6). These two world-famous landmarks indicated to viewers that this was a 'true' representation of a real event, without needing to explain precisely what that event was. Then the artist further invites us to identify with the unfolding drama. Gone are the jeering crowds described in the *Penny Illustrated Paper*. Here a respectable, and respectful, crowd of concerned citizens look on in consternation and then withdraw in a disciplined manner as the fire takes hold. Coupled with a point of view close to street level, the message is clear. This is a crowd of people just like us, looking up in awe at the towering building above.

To reinforce the sense of this as a significant event, the artist has made the buildings rather more impressive than they were in life; more fashionable shopping boutiques than manufactories of mundane commodities. In the first slide the shops are ablaze with light and passers-by peer in at every side, with the second and third floors combined to create grand double-height picture windows.

Another change was introduced to conform with the conventions of magic lantern representation. A night scene of a flaming building is more visually compelling than the scene played out in daylight. Yet we know from contemporary accounts that the Cheapside fire began with an explosion at 3.00pm and, according to the *ILN*: "After an hour's burning, the fire at Messrs Foster's burnt itself out by destroying everything within its reach."[7] At that time of year, sunset would have been at about 5.30pm so it is probable the entire scene would have played out in daylight.[8] Here, authenticity is sacrificed to artistic effect.

THE CHEAPSIDE FIRE SET AND ITS IMITATORS

The Cheapside fire was clearly a popular subject, imitated by several slide manufacturers. One very similar version to the Hughes set is shown in Fig. 10. This time there are various minor differences. Note, for example, the policeman and additional firefighter who appear centre stage in the second image and the repositioning of the fire engine in the third. Close inspection reveals many similar variations.

A third set (Fig. 11), again from the Martin Gilbert Collection, offers another version sufficiently similar that we can assume a shared source. A balcony now runs the entire length of the terrace, and the foreground figures seem far from naturalistic; although curiously the second and third floors have been reinstated, and the incongruous steeple of St Mary-le-Bow no longer looms over the scene.

What should we make of these variant slides? Some would appear to be from the same manufacturer, the trivial differences indicating a degree of latitude enjoyed by slide painters when working up finished slides from existing designs. Those clearly from different manufacturers tell us something about the competitive and cut-throat nature of the lantern slide business. There is no obvious way to determine which version came first, but there is the clear suggestion of plagiarism; demonstrating a lack of scruples where commercial interests were concerned and perhaps underlining the inadequacies of nineteenth-century copyright protections. For the researcher today, this is an important reminder when identifying slides by title alone from surviving slide catalogues.

The level of competitiveness amongst slide manufacturers proves that the *Cheapside Fire* was a particularly successful slide design – why might this be? Of course, serendipity played its part. The powerful image created by the LSC was the starting point, and this would probably not have been taken but for the close proximity to their City of London offices. To suit the requirements of stereoscopy this was taken at an oblique angle rather than head-on, which 'allowed' the introduction of St Paul's Cathedral in the background – a vital ingredient in establishing the 'authenticity' of the final slide sequence. It was also fortunate that enough of the buildings was left standing to allow slide artists to recreate a convincing replica of them in their former state. Lastly, because the fire was principally confined to just two buildings, the whole story of the Cheapside Fire (from initial explosion to burnt-out shell) could be captured within the frame of this one image.

This is an 'authentic' scene cleverly manipulated to evoke an emotional response from its viewers – one of fear. Unlike the slides in Fig. 1, this is not just about visual spectacle. As the Newton catalogue emphasises, the sequence ends with 'Fire Engines playing on the Smoking Ruins'.[9] We see the whole event play out in its entirety, from unsuspecting window shoppers to the actions of the fire brigade, and crucially it ends with the terrifying aftermath. In this awful coda, we are confronted with the ruined building in skeletal form. And like all *memento mori*, it serves as both a memorial and a warning.

I have suggested that the success of the *Cheapside Fire* slides owed as much to the artistry of the slide maker as it did to the events they represented. In Part 2 I will look at the 1897 fire in Cripplegate, just a few streets away – the most destructive in London during the entire Victorian era, when the fears evoked by the Cheapside fire were fully realised.

REFERENCES

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7. *ILN*, loc. cit.
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