

JAMES BAMFORTH

A talk given by Robert McMillan to the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain on 29th April, 1978.

My own interest in Bamforth's began in 1973 when an old lady came in one day to the Tolson Memorial Museum in Huddersfield where I was then working as an assistant. Her immediate purpose was to find out whether the museum had any Bamforth postcards to exchange or sell. However it turned out that this old lady, who had been born in Holmfirth, had been a child model for Bamforth's in the early 1900s, and had appeared in a large number of postcards, and also in a number of magic lantern slides made by Bamforth. Some tape recordings were made of her recollections and gradually a small file of information on the subject was built up. This lady was also one of the correspondents of the American Bamforth collector Major Robert W. Scherer, and it was she who acted as the initial intermediary in the contacts which resulted in 1975 in the purchase of Major Scherer's collection by Kirklees Libraries and Museums. Owing to my involvement with her, I was asked to carry out the initial work of bringing the collection to Huddersfield and of making arrangements for dealing with it when it arrived.

This meant being thrown in at the deep end with a largely unfamiliar range of subject matter, including lantern slides. The situation was one which will probably have been encountered by many people who are interested in Bamforth lantern slides, particularly those approaching the subject for the first time. What I would like to do in the course of the first part of the present talk is to give a personal impression of the problems which are most likely to be met, and to follow this by an examination of the ways in which the Scherer Collection can be of use involving these problems. And as a final point I would like to outline the ways in which Kirklees Libraries and Museums would welcome the assistance of the private collector in improving the Scherer Collection for mutual advantage.

There is little doubt at present that Bamforth Lantern slides are attracting increasing attention from collectors and enthusiasts. This interest ranges over all social classes, and is not confined to Bamforth lantern slides. It applies also to Bamforth postcards, and serious collectors sometimes collect both. One sign of this interest is the present high cost of buying slides in the small quantities in which they usually appear through the collecting trade. In the modern period one early appreciation of their artistic value can be found in the book *Movement in Two Dimensions* by Olive Cook, published in 1963 but which is now out of print. In this, Olive Cook examined a number of sets of Bamforth slides in comparison with those of contemporaries, and gave a brief account of their manufacture.

Even in his own lifetime, James Bamforth, the founder of the business was something of a celebrity in the lantern slide trade. He was interviewed a number of times, twice in 'The Optical Magic Lantern Journal', in 1893 and again in 1902. He was the subject of an article in a magazine called the 'Photogram' in 1899, and in the 1905-6 season was interviewed for a long supplement in 'Caxton' magazine which was one of the journals of the printing and stationery trades. Although this mainly reflected contemporary interest in Bamforth's postcards, it cast a great deal of light on the lantern slide part of his business.

It clearly gave Bamforth himself a great deal of amused satisfaction to be the centre of this attention from the metropolitan journalists who made their laborious way up from the capital by rail, changing at Huddersfield where they probably stayed overnight before taking the branch line out to Holmfirth to meet him in time for the start of his morning's work. Those who arrived without an appointment sometimes had to be kept waiting an hour. But he clearly enjoyed these visits. Given notice, he would put on a demonstration of his skills at backcloth painting for the on-the-spot photographing of a scene. And these occasions gave him a chance to tell his favourite stories. The one of which he was most proud was that concerning the illustration of the set of twelve slides for 'Excelsior'

where he painted the backcloths, arranged the foreground props and the models, and carried out the photography, all between the hours of 11.00 and 6.00 on a single day.

However, there has not always been this interest. After the ending of the magic lantern era, Bamforth's like other firms, were left with large holdings of unusable or unsaleable slides, and subsequently many of these unfortunately had to be destroyed. But the picture is distorted somewhat by the way in which the history of the firm in the early 1900s is treated in the various published accounts. After 1902-3 when Bamforth's began to make a name for themselves as postcard publishers comparatively less is heard of the lantern slide business. The impression is sometimes given that it was superseded and petered out. The origins of this impression can be found as early as the 'Caxton' article of 1905-6, which refers to the lantern slide business as having involved no more than 'the painting of a few magic lantern slides not so many years ago.'

How misleading this is can be seen from a brief background examination of the size and continuity of Bamforth's lantern slide production. James Bamforth began to make lantern slides at an unknown date after 1870, the year in which he started his photography business. James Bamforth himself remained in direct charge of lantern slide and studio production into the 1900s, possibly until about 1910 when the firm was reorganised as a limited company with Bamforth's son Edwin Bamforth as managing director and chief shareholder. He found time to branch out into other enterprises. From 1897-1900 he produced films with Riley Brothers of Bradford; in 1902 or 1903 he launched an amazingly successful postcard trade, and into the 1900s he and his family carried on the work of ordinary commercial and portrait photography with studios at Holmfirth, Huddersfield and Castleton in the Derbyshire Peak District.

But the indications are that throughout all this the lantern slide business continued to grow, though obviously not at the same rate as the postcard trade. In 1901 the Bamforth lantern slide catalogue contained 234 pages and Bamforth was advertising himself as the 'Largest Producer in the World' of life model lantern slides. In 1902 the stock in complete sets was said to amount to one and a half million slides with hundreds of thousands of odds. In 1905-6 he claimed to have a stock of two million slides in sets, plus hundreds of thousands of odd slides, and at the same time the octavo catalogue had grown to 356 pages. A few years later, by the period around 1908-10 the catalogue had further expanded to 428 pages, containing around 800 titles. The cumulative 1914-15 catalogue ran to something like 600 pages.

This means we are dealing with a continuing production of lantern slides, which even if it came to be less important in the overall activities of the firm, lasted for a period of forty or so years up to the First World War at least.

Any approach to this gives rise to two kinds of problems for the collector or the student. The first of these are historical in nature. In the first place, why Holmfirth? Why should a small town like Holmfirth, set in a deep Pennine Valley and with a population of no more than about 10,000 people, have become the seat of this nationally successful lantern slide business in the late Victorian decades? Apart from the personal genius of James Bamforth, were there any links with the character of the district itself? And in commercial as well as in artistic terms, why was the product so successful in holding its popularity over such a long period of time? One thing which makes it difficult to answer these questions is the fact that the formative period between 1870 and the 1890s in which James Bamforth developed his approach to the marketing and production of lantern slides presents an almost complete historical blank compared with the later period. Again, how far can the Bamforth lantern slide business be linked with James Bamforth's other activities as a film producer and a post-

card publisher — activities which can sometimes appear to be separate and unconnected ventures?

Apart from these questions, there are the immediate difficulties facing the collector, which might be called the practical problems of collecting. I would like to look at these by comparing the difficulties of the Bamforth lantern slide collector with those of the Bamforth postcard collector. There is justification for this in the fact that a number of specialists collect both, whilst as I hope to suggest later on, there is an essential commercial and artistic unity between the lantern slides and the postcards. I think I can show that in every respect the difficulties of the lantern slide collector are the greater.

To start with the simple matter of availability. It is apparent both from the results of advertising and for actively looking for Bamforth lantern slides at flea markets and in antique shops that the lantern slides are the harder to come by. Postcards are by comparison cheap and plentiful. And assuming that it is possible to find slides for sale, even in mint condition complete with their original labels and gummed strips, there is the question of identification. Here there is a curious commercial anomaly operating against the lantern slide purchaser. For although Bamforth's were absolutely rigorous about identifying their postcards and photographic products with the imprint of the firm, and in establishing their copyright over their postcard photographs, the name of the firm seems never to have been put onto individual lantern slides as a matter of course. In the later sets it seems to have been usual to identify the first and last slides of a set by a credit in the picture. But the usual means of identifying Bamforth lantern slides has to be the label 'FROM LIFE MODELS — Copyright', and details such as the typography and the placing of the labels, assuming these have not been lost in a re-binding. If these have gone, the only guide is the ability to recognise the Bamforth style of photography and colouring, or to identify models or studio props seen in known Bamforth pictures.

Dating too is difficult, more so than in the case of the postcards, many of which are post marked or from 1905 sometimes carry a photo copyright date. The dating of postcards is made easier by the fact that in the black and white period especially, numerous back formats with differences in layout, wording and design are found, and these can be classified into basic groups and then correlated with post marks or other datings. However, during the entire period of lantern slide production, only two different labelling formats appear to have been used. The difference between these is that in what appears to be the earlier of the two, the legend 'FROM LIFE MODELS — Copyright' appears in a top corner on a half round slip of paper instead of along the bottom. It is sometimes possible to date by the chance appearance in a picture of a date on a poster or newspaper, or by a known event such as the Boer War, or by details of contemporary costume or furniture, but in general dating is often problematic without access to catalogues or documentary sources.

It is unfortunate too for the lantern slide student that the extreme limit of living memory now takes us back only as far as the start of the postcard period in the early 1900s. Compared with the wealth of recollections which have been recorded for this time, there is nothing comparable for the Victorian decades which are of importance in the history of the Bamforth lantern slide. The accounts of former child models and employees largely reflect the increasing significance of the postcard in the business of Bamforth's, and whilst most of the models interviewed have had postcards or photographs to show and talk about, none seem to have had lantern slides, although it is known that some were involved to some extent in lantern slide photography.

There are of course a number of publications in which information is given about lantern slides directly or indirectly. *Movement in Two Dimensions* by Olive Cook has already been mentioned, and since then a

number of other books have appeared. These include F. Alderson's Bamforth centenary book *The Comic Postcard in English Life*, G.J. Mellor's *Picture Pioneers* published in 1971, Tonie and Valmai Kolt's *Picture Postcards of the Golden Age* and Benny Green's recent book. In addition there is the more detailed duplicated pamphlet by Mr. R.M. Jones *Slides, Calendar, Films and Postcards by Bamforth and Co.* which seems to have been circulated privately. The strength and weakness of all these accounts is that for the pre-1914-18 period they rely to a large extent on personal recollections and reminiscences. These were often recorded at a distance of up to sixty years in time from the events themselves, which often took place in childhood. And whilst they contain a fascinating and valuable body of anecdotal and background information, they sometimes give rise to uncertainties and conflicts of evidence which can never be sorted out. They convey to the full the fun and wonder of the studios and of the Bamforths, but can be questionable on chronological and factual usefulness. The research of Mr. Robin Benfield into the films, published in his *Bijou Kinema* in 1976, has shown just how confusing this kind of material has been in obscuring the true picture and in drawing the attention away from the real historical issues.

To summarise therefore, I think it can be shown that it is often extremely difficult for the Bamforth lantern slide collector to assess the quality and extent of his collection against the vast body of material which Bamforth's produced over a long period of time, and to flesh out his collection with meaningful historical information.

How can the Scherer Collection be of use in providing the collector and the historian with resources and facilities for the study of the Bamforth lantern slide?

It would be worth beginning by looking briefly at the origins of the collection itself. Major Scherer is a retired United States Air Force officer, and the collection began with his interest in religious music. It was this which led him to the collecting of the coloured Bamforth hymn postcards in which popular hymns were illustrated in sets with a different verse on each card. From this developed the idea of compiling a collection of the entire range of the coloured song and hymn cards. At the same time, in England, Mr. R.M. Jones was working along the same lines with the aim of producing a checklist for the use of the collector. Major Scherer, however, expanded the scope of his own collection by systematically acquiring first class specimens of all types of Bamforth postcards including the black and white and the later artists drawn comics. This was done partly with the help of collectors abroad, especially in Britain, through the medium of the Bamforth Collectors' Study Group which he founded. In 1973 he published a checklist to his collection.

It was obvious to Major Scherer that a collection of this size and comprehensiveness should be kept together for future historical research. There was also a potential physical danger from storms and hurricanes along the Florida shore where he lives. Eventually the sale of the collection to Kirlees Libraries and Museums Service was agreed as a result of offers of great generosity on Major Scherer's part. It is now in the public reference collections of the service and the policy is to make it a definitive collection of all aspects of Bamforth history from the beginning of the firm to the present day. Messrs. Bamforth and Co. have kindly agreed to supply up to date material and historical items come regularly from Major Scherer. Tape recordings, documentary evidence and additional material have been added, and much of this has come through the help of former models and their families, fully justifying Major Scherer's desire to see the collection return to the immediate Holmfirth area. A gallery in the Huddersfield headquarters of the service has been set aside for the display of various aspects of the collection.

Although it began as a postcard collection, it is now of immense relevance to the lantern slide student. At the time of purchase, it contained only a handful of lantern slides. But this side has now been expanded principally by the generous gift by Messrs. Bamforth and Co. of a considerable number of lantern slides still held by the firm, along with negatives and pro-

DADDY

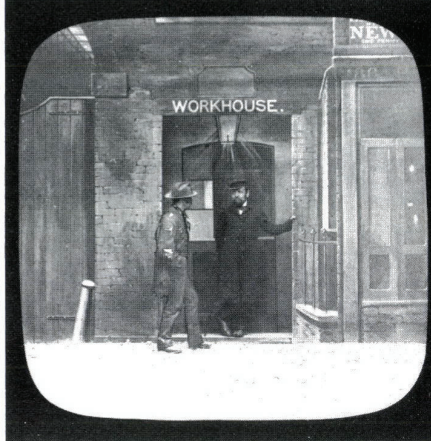


If, when we get up to heaven and mother was waiting.....

NELL'S DARK DAYS



"You don't know where those violets come from" she cried



He could only be admitted to the casual ward for the night



Rodney sank down on his knees

duction and archival material. There are now in the region of 2,000 slides including both coloured and plain, covering something like 240 titles, though few of the sets are complete. It is hoped to fill the gaps either by purchase or by borrowing slides for copying. Eventually it is intended to catalogue and index the slides with the collection as a whole. Messrs. Bamforth and Co. have also loaned original catalogues for copying on microfilm.

This material, when put together with the existing local information goes a long way towards answering the various problems which have already been outlined. One document in particular is of outstanding importance. This is the detailed cumulative catalogue dating to around 1908-10. It is important for two reasons. Firstly because it lists all titles produced up to that time and gives under each title not only the number of slides in the set, but the line for each slide corresponding with the gummed strip which was originally fixed to the top edge of each slide. The titles themselves are classified into a dozen or so different categories — songs, hymns, comics, lecture sets, services of song and so on. This means assuming the original labels are still bound into the slide, that it is possible to establish with greater certainty not only the identification of a set as being by Bamforth's, but to find out how complete the set is. In some cases optional slides were available. It also makes it possible to distinguish between original and later illustrations of a title, for some popular numbers such as the song 'Daddy' were re-photographed.

The second important feature arises from the internal structure of the catalogue. Bamforth's seem to have been in the habit of issuing supplementary lists of the new seasons additions to their stocks. However, these lists were also added to the detailed catalogue of all previous productions. This means that the detailed catalogue consists of a chronological sandwich of succeeding seasons' productions rather like an archaeological section. It is therefore possible to date roughly any title by finding its place in the pagination. The major historical landmark of the Boer War produced a number of patriotic and war sets which come close together. Some of the early parts of the catalogue refer to titles taken from publications of the 1870s and 1880s and although the slides were not necessarily made immediately, their appearance there supports this analysis of the structure of the listings. Additional documentary evidence such as an advert of 1900-1 referring to the catalogue as having 234 pages should eventually make dating possible to the year.

This means that among other things, it becomes possible to analyse the development of the subject matter. A major war or a disaster such as the Boer War, the 1914-18 war or the sinking of the 'Titanic' was good business at any time. But before 1900 Bamforth illustrated a large number of works such as the popular ballads of G.R. Simms and a good many temperance and religious subjects. There must have been a connection here with the non-conformist tradition of the area which possibly gave James Bamforth his first introduction to the lantern slide markets. The district, although not densely populated, has many separate townships, villages and hamlets. In these places communal life was centred on the chapel with its 'schools' where religious and moral instruction was given by means of the lantern slide, especially after the introduction of the Sciopticon lantern with its improved reliability and brightness.

Colonial themes such as 'Fun up the Ganges' and 'The Nigger and the Tigers' also appeared. Topographical subjects Bamforth largely ignored, especially after the turn of the century. This fact, which he mentions in one of his interviews is confirmed by the catalogue. Increasingly he turned to the popular songs of the day and it is probably to the 1900s that most of the typical Bamforth lantern slides loved by collectors belong. The catalogue, when compared with the slides themselves can also provide the basis for an analysis of their artistic and emotional development.

What the lantern slide material in the Scherer Collection enables us to do in general is to penetrate the 'folksy' accounts which circulate at present, and to adopt a more properly historical approach to the Bamforth lantern slide enterprise up to World War 1. Bamforth was after all in business not to make lantern



slides or postcards or films, or to provide fun and games for the people of Holmfirth, but to make money, and unless this is kept in mind, it is difficult to keep the historical issues in perspective. Bamforth's were in fact a highly efficient and competitive business, running as an organised assembly line in which cheapness, speed of response to the market, speed of production and the cutting of costs were all-important.

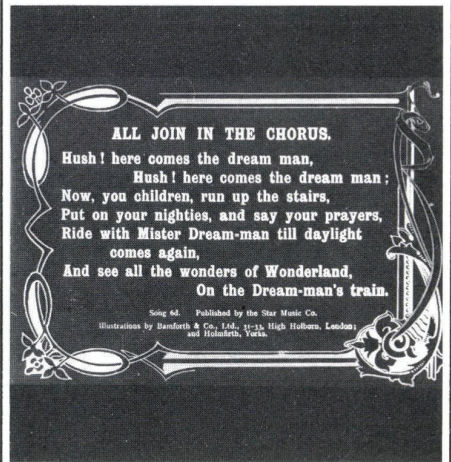
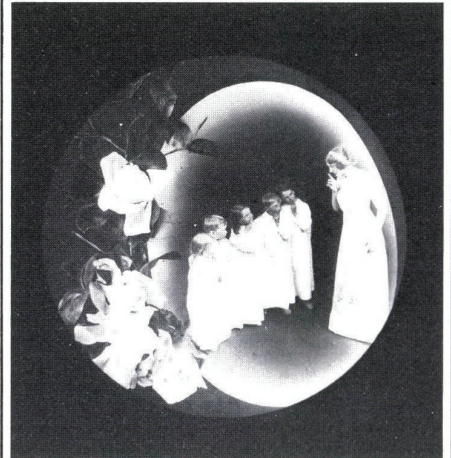
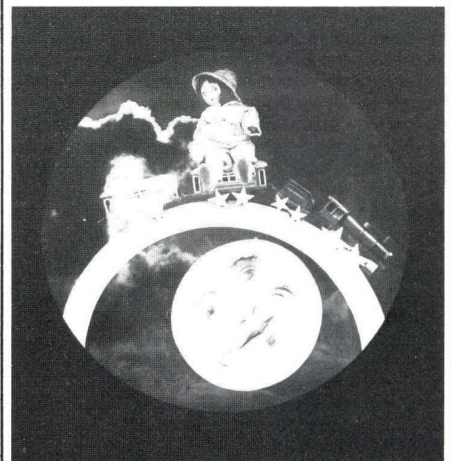
Production was seasonal, the photography being done mainly in the summer, largely under the controlled lighting of the studio, the winter being devoted to copying and slide colouring and binding. With a song or a hymn, the process would often begin with the planning of the set from the sheet music. By the 1900s at least there were standing arrangements made with the leading music publishers, and often a number of the season's new songs were prepared in advance of any one of them becoming a hit. James Bamforth himself specialised in the painting of the backcloths and arranged the models and the props ready for photography. All this was carried out at high speed, and any subject would be prepared almost immediately to a customer's order. The processing and washing and the colouring which was one of the most highly skilled of the operations involved, were then carried out. Binding was also done on the premises, though there are reasons for believing that some slides may have been sent out for binding. It was up to the purchaser to order from the catalogue by means of a code word usually taken from the title of the set. Bamforth was capable of photographing six hundred new subjects a year in the 1900s, helped by the fact that increasingly his son Edwin was taking over more of the routine work of the firm.

Bamforth's slides were not only popular but they were cheaper than those of his competitors. This was achieved by means of a variety of ways apart from intensive studio production. It is well known that he relied on untrained local people as his models, as well as members of his family and some of his employees. However, what this meant was that he probably had very little expense with this item. Although the child models were usually given a few pence for their sessions, the Holmfirth people who were not employees or family probably took part for the fun of it, and their help seems to have been acknowledged by gifts of photographs and pictures in which they had appeared rather than by money. And again there are reasons for believing that the pay which Bamforth offered some of his employees was less than that obtainable in the local textile industry which itself has a reputation for relatively poor wages.

Costs were reduced in other ways, such as by bulk buying chemicals. A good example of Bamforth's economising was the way in which he avoided paying a local water rate which he considered excessive by laying on his own water supply from a spring behind the studios and installing a 350,000 gallon tank to hold the considerable amounts of water needed in the darkrooms.

James Bamforth was also astute in re-using his studio props and backcloths and existing negatives and art work. The same backcloths, studio mock ups and photographic motifs can be seen over and over again, reused in numerous different ways. The most brilliant example of this was the use of a number of lantern slide negatives for the production of the black and white postcards in the early 1900s, when selections were made from existing lantern slide sets for printing off in postcard form. He was also rigorous in suppressing any infringement of his photo copyright by competitors, even to the extent of sending one of his principal female models, Hannah Hinchcliffe to New York to appear as a witness in a court case.

It is becoming possible also to see the overall relationship between the Bamforth lantern slide business and the other interests of the firm in the pre-1914-18 period. Robin Benfield has shown how Bamforth's production of films in co-operation with Riley Brothers of Bradford was an off-shoot of their experience in the magic lantern slide market. Riley Brothers, who appear to have done a large business in the renting of lantern slides and as lanternists developed and made their own cinematograph apparatus, in order to expand their trade. A large part of their stock in fact consisted of Bamforth slides and it was therefore to James Bamforth that they turned for the pro-



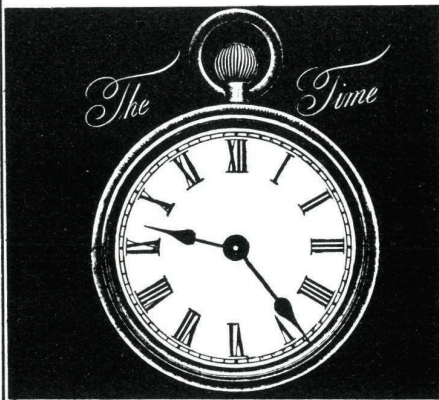
duction of a number of short films made between 1897 and 1900. There is no evidence that James Bamforth himself acted as a travelling lanternist or hired slides at this time, and if this is so, presumably the film operation came to an end owing to the loss of interest from Riley Brothers. However, it arose from their links with the magic lantern trade and was not an erratic phenomenon; it is known also that by the early 1900s Bamforth's were giving lantern slide shows in Holmfirth, and the Valley Theatre there was to be one of their interests. Bamforth and Co. also had a later re-entry to film production starting in 1914.

James Bamforth's entry into postcard publishing was a classic example of commercial spin-off based on the experience of lantern slide photography and to some extent on the lantern slide lists themselves. After 1902 when the Post Office first permitted a message to be written on the back of the card, and postcards achieved more popularity, Bamforth's were among the first to seize the opportunities. Their earliest identifiable cards date to 1903. Very soon Bamforth was issuing postcards mostly in sets of three or four with pictures selected from the firm's stock of lantern slide negatives. The idea of selling postcards in this way with verses from the songs or hymns was clearly a successful sales device adopted from the lantern slide sets. Selections from new lantern slide sets were sometimes issued as postcards. There are parallels in the development of the artistic treatment of the postcards and the lantern slides especially after the introduction of colour printed postcards around 1906-7, and eventually all lantern slides were sold coloured, none being plain.

So far I have attempted to outline some of the ways in which the resources of the Scherer Collection can lead the collector to a greater understanding of Bamforth lantern slides and their history. I would like in conclusion to suggest ways in which we in turn would welcome the help of collectors such as members of the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain. Many of the sets in the Scherer Collection are incomplete and we are anxious not only to fill the gaps, but to make the collection fully representative of the many styles and subjects which existed. In addition there is a need to assemble further documentary evidence of which there is still much to discover. In fact our ultimate goal is to collect at least one original example of every item produced by Bamforth's, along with supporting material. How far this can be done will depend to a large extent on private collectors.

We would be interested in the first place in acquiring slides through purchase, or possibly through exchange arrangements, for postcards, for example. The same is true for material such as catalogues, order lists, advertisements and packaging. Failing this, however, we would be extremely grateful for the loan of slides so that they can be copied on 35mm transparencies. This would not only provide us with copies but would provide a reference back up for collectors in case of accidental breakage or loss. And, in addition, we would be glad to have copies or photostats of original Bamforth advertisements or articles about Bamforth in contemporary journals or books. Much material exists which so far is unknown to us, but which lantern slide specialists may be aware of. And even if members themselves are unable to help, information about other people or institutions which have Bamforth material would be extremely useful. Finally I hope that I have managed to suggest in the course of this talk that the work of improving and expanding the Scherer Collection can only be of mutual benefit both to the collection and to the collector.

Gold Watch Slide

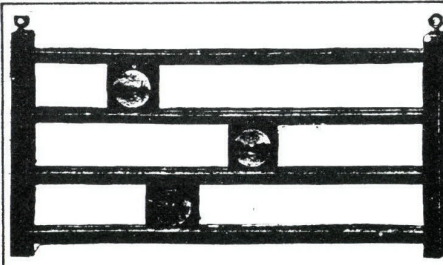


The Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain

The Annual General Meeting of the Society was held in January at the National Film Theatre when all the presently serving officers were re-elected unopposed.

Perhaps the most exciting matter to emerge from the meeting was the decision to hold a major magic lantern exhibition in London sometime in 1980. This would be similar in scope to exhibitions of advertising material, phonographs and the radio held in recent years at major London museums. The editor understands that a working party will be formed shortly and meanwhile the Committee is proceeding with initial planning, details of which will be circulated to members before the next meeting in April.

A donation has been received from Maria Adriana Prolo of the magnificent 235 page fully coloured catalogue of the Turin National Cinema Museum of which she is the director. This splendidly comprehensive review of pre-cinema history is available on loan to members by application to the Secretary. (The Journal production team is proud to note that its first published credit in a scholarly work appears on page 26 of the Turin catalogue.)



The next meeting of the Society will be on April 21st at the Architectural Association in London. Discussions are underway for an excursion to replace the June meeting. Brussels is the favoured destination, with St. Ives and the Isle of Man as poor seconds. The attraction of Brussels of course is threefold: the nearby museum of cinema history, the two Sunday morning markets and also the possibility of meeting up with some amazing Dutch and Belgian collectors. Details from the Secretary at the next meeting.

Finally, don't forget that copies of Volume 1 No. 1 are still available. Also we are printing fewer of Number 2, so if you want more than one copy order now and mail your completed form and cheque to the Secretary and.... a hearty welcome to all new members.

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These books have been published since 1963 and, although not necessarily still in print, are of interest to the lantern and optical toy enthusiast.

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The editor is grateful to R.G. Morris for abstracting this Bibliography from the catalogue of his collection

Chorus of Gentlemen



THE MANAGEMENT BEG
 TO OFFER THEIR BEST
 THANKS TO THOSE
 LADIES WHO HAVE SO
 KINDLY REMOVED
 THEIR HATS