

# THE NOAKES FAMILY AND THE 'NOAKESOSCOPE'

John Kennedy Melling

**I HAVE BEEN INTERESTED** in theatre all my life, and especially in model theatres, including the 'Juvenile Drama' sheets of printed characters and scenery. When I found that some of the characters were based on contemporary famous actors, I started the research that in July 1969 resulted in my having two theatre books published the same day – *Southend Playhouses from 1793* and *Discovering Lost Theatres*. In the 1950s I organised a Model Theatres exhibition to commemorate the centenary of Benjamin Pollock Ltd, at the Palace Theatre, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex. Rob Currie, then Chairman of BBC Radio's Palace of Varieties programme, who was also a resident of Westcliff, brought along some of his wax cylinders and an early phonograph. The exhibition was reported in *The Stage* and as a result I received a letter from Charles Trentham, the puppet correspondent of that paper, expressing interest in my exhibition. He told me that he was also 'Gerald Morice', the puppet correspondent of the *World's Fair*. We kept in touch for some years.

During this period, with either my late mother or our best friend, Barbara Miller (the actress of Blackadder fame), I visited many puppet theatres in Cologne, Vienna, Venice, Milan and Paris, and corresponded with many puppeteers in other cities, all the time keeping Gerald informed of my discoveries. In return he sent me data on various relevant topics.

One day he sent me a copy of an article by John Betjeman that had appeared in *The Spectator* for 30 March 1956, titled 'City and Suburban'.<sup>1</sup> Betjeman wrote enthusiastically about a visit he had made, with Robert Aickman of the Inland Waterways Association and Sir Arthur Elton, to the bungalow home of Mr and Mrs Gordon W. Noakes, in Westbury Road, Southend-on-Sea, a couple of miles from our Westcliff home. The article explained that Gordon was the official magic lantern projectionist to the Royal Albert Hall, where he 'erects the large screen behind the singers in *Hiawatha* and projects onto it the American-Indian setting'.

The 'Noakesoscope' that Betjeman was shown, as he christened it, had been invented by D.W. Noakes, the late father of Gordon Noakes, who gave dioramic lectures in town halls and to philosophical society audiences in the 1890s. Four lenses were focused onto the same spot on the screen to enable them to portray dissolving views and rudimentary moving images. Betjeman stressed in his article that a permanent home should be found for this unique and beautiful machine. He was most impressed with 'The Lodge by night and day', 'Leighton Buzzard by night', and 'The Cross-Channel Packet'. Gerald thought I should follow this up, and so of course I did.

I later wrote an article on the Noakesoscope in the *Southend Standard*, and corresponded with John Betjeman as a result. He was later knighted, became an excellent Poet Laureate and was very helpful to me when I was editing *The Liveryman* magazine and when Barbara Miller and I presented shows at various festivals, including that of the City of London.

I had been appointed Dramatic Critic and Correspondent for *The Stage* for southern Essex, covering the theatres of Westcliff, Southend, Hadleigh, Grays Thurrock, Basildon and Chelmsford. I therefore made the first of several visits to the Noakes in their pleasant house, and watched several evenings of entertainment with the Noakesoscope. In fact, my mother and I were the last audience in the Noakes family home, in November 1956. I was indeed very impressed by the beauty of the images projected by the Noakesoscope.

The Noakes family made a lasting impression on the cinema industry, which I can perhaps sum up in the section I wrote about them in the chapter 'The Shadow Moves' in my book *Southend Playhouses from 1793*, published in 1969:

*David William Noakes (1860–1934) and his son, Gordon W. (1885–1958) came from Greenwich. The father was trained in engineering and optical science, and was an optician, but took over the family hay and straw business to become president of the British Hay Traders' Association in 1921. Father and son were lanternists to the Royal Albert Hall, and the father was a lantern lecturer, including a time with Charles Spurgeon. He was a manufacturer of projectors, and from a Greenwich guide for 1897, kindly given to me by Mrs Noakes junior after her husband's death, the family can claim to be the first film renters in the world, other firms merely selling the films. His own projector, with quadruple lenses in vertical series to mix images into a movement, was later to be christened the 'Noakesoscope' by John Betjeman.*

*D.W. moved to Southend for his health in 1929, but died there five years later. Gordon came to reside in the town, in Westbury Road, and died on 16 May 1958, just before the exhibition honouring him. I was privileged to be in his last private audience for his 'Noakesoscope', and before his widow left the town she gave me several family film relics.*



Collection David Robinson

1. Mr D.W. Noakes aged 35 from OMLJ January 1897.



2. Silver pocket watch belonging to Mr D.W. Noakes supplied to him by J. Theobald & Co. Collection of J.K. Melling

## NOTES

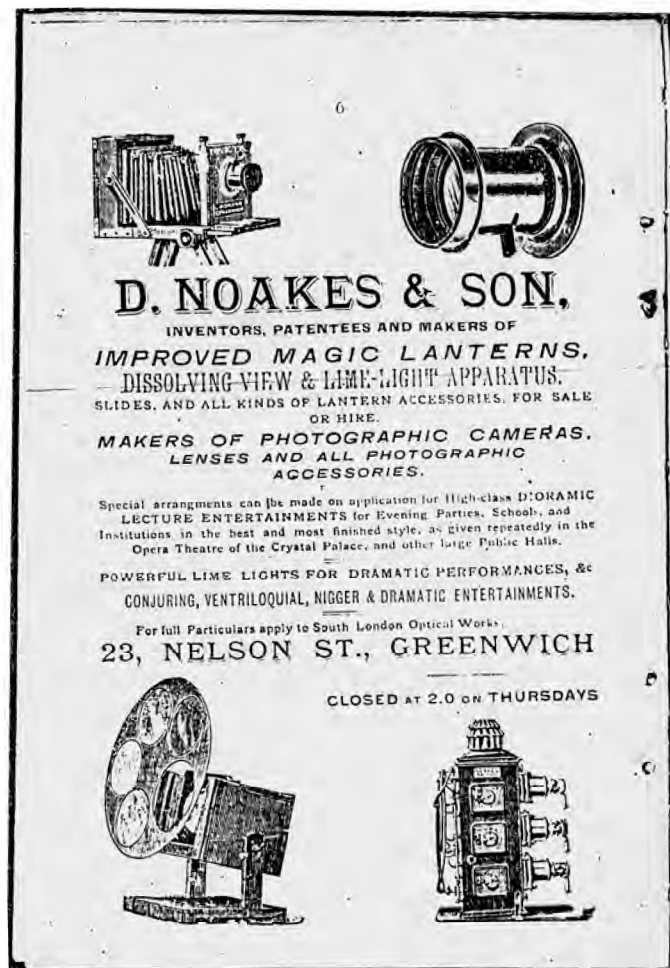
- 1 Betjeman's 1956 article was reprinted, under the title 'John Betjeman visits Mr Noakes', in *NMLJ* Vol. 8 No. 3 (December 1998), 1 – Ed.

Charles Spurgeon was, of course, the famous divine Dr Charles Spurgeon (1834–92), a superb preacher, and minister of the Baptist Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, built for him in 1861. His sermons had a wide sale, often using humour to make a memorable point: in one, he said the road to heaven was hard (as he walked slowly up the steps to the pulpit), while the road to hell was easy (sliding down the banister rail!).

There were many other programmes and devices presented by various inventors around the year 1900 in the Southend area. The pioneer of British moving pictures Birt Acres (1852–1918), for example, used his 'biunial dissolving lantern' with five slides dissolving into a slow movement in 1892, and later supplied films to Jasper Redfern in Southend in 1900. Redfern advertised the films as 'the Wonderful Berliner Talking Machine'. Southend's Hotel Metropole advertised the 'Lloyds All Talking Machine' on 26 May 1904 – over two decades before Hollywood's Warner Brothers launched commercial 'talkies' with the Al Jolson films.

The exhibition mentioned in the account from *Southend Playhouses* was one that I organised in July 1958 at the Southend Odeon cinema, built in the 1930s to seat more than 3,000 and sadly demolished in 2004 to become part of the Essex University campus. This exhibition, which I entitled *The Shadow Moves*, was to honour three film pioneers who had lived in Southend: Birt Acres, whose son still lived in the borough; Arthur Melbourne Cooper, born 1872; and Gordon W. Noakes, who was born in 1885 and died just before the exhibition opened.

I had previously arranged for Associated-Rediffusion Television, the local independent TV station, to feature the Noakesoscope on an evening programme, but a Middle East monarch got himself assassinated so the appearance was cancelled and we had to bring



**D. NOAKES & SON.**  
INVENTORS, PATENTEES AND MAKERS OF  
**IMPROVED MAGIC LANTERNS.**  
DISSOLVING VIEW & LIME-LIGHT APPARATUS.  
SLIDES, AND ALL KINDS OF LANTERN ACCESSORIES, FOR SALE  
OR HIRE.  
**MAKERS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC CAMERAS.**  
LENSES AND ALL PHOTOGRAPHIC  
ACCESSORIES.  
Special arrangements can be made on application for High-class DIORAMIC  
LECTURE ENTERTAINMENTS for Evening Parties, Schools, and  
Institutions in the best and most finished style, as given repeatedly in the  
Opera Theatre of the Crystal Palace, and other large Public Halls.  
**POWERFUL LIME LIGHTS FOR DRAMATIC PERFORMANCES, &  
CONJURING, VENTRILOQUIAL, NIGGER & DRAMATIC ENTERTAINMENTS.**  
For full Particulars apply to South London Optical Works,  
**23, NELSON ST., GREENWICH**  
CLOSED AT 2.0 ON THURSDAYS

4. Noakes & Son's advertisement from the *Invicta Directory*, 1893.

the projector back from the studios. We did, however, take Melbourne Cooper to the BBC TV studios for him to appear in the *Tonight* programme.

As I mentioned in my reference to the Noakes in my book, the family came to Southend from Greenwich, and there are some traces of them in the history of that borough. Fig. 3 shows an advertisement from the *Greenwich Borough Guide* for 1910–11 for the 'Electrical and General Engineers' G. Noakes & Co. There is no specific reference to films or lanterns, and the name of the firm would seem to imply that it was run by the son, Gordon. Another advertisement in the *Guide* illustrates a photographic and optical shop at 23 Nelson Street, shown with a window card advertising 'Lantern Slides for Sale or Hire'.

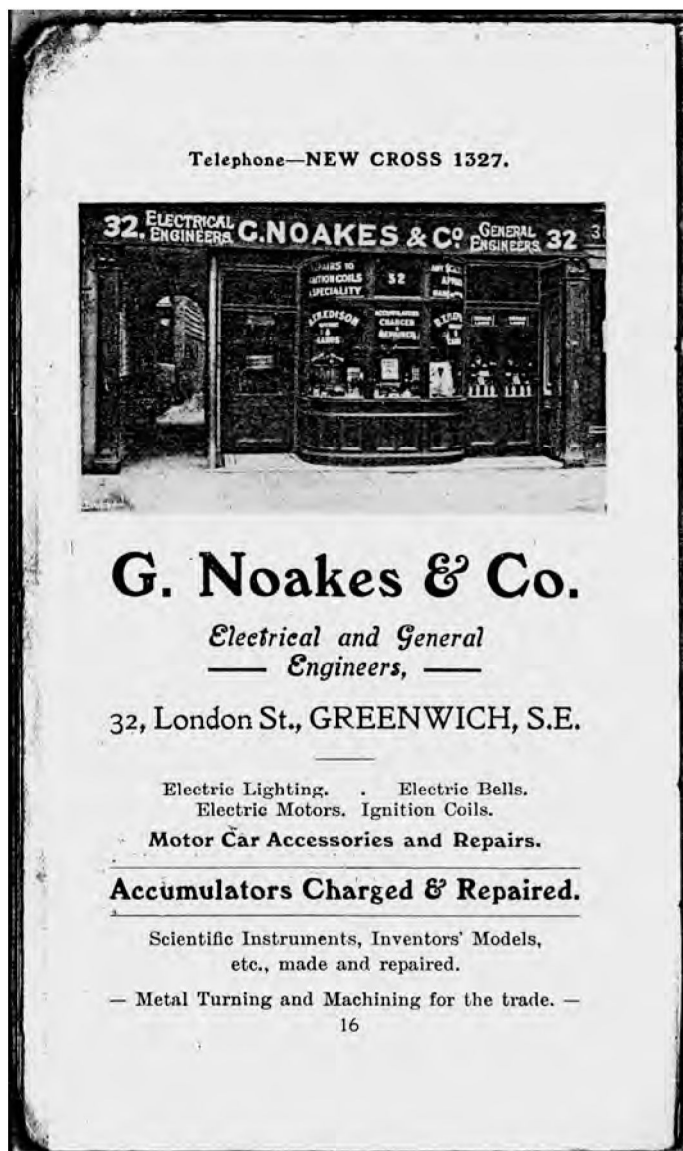
The 23 Nelson Street address also appears in an advertisement (Fig. 4) from the *Invicta Directory* of 1893. Here the firm is described as D. Noakes and Son, with a clear reference to 'the Dioramic Lecture Entertainments ... as given repeatedly in the Opera Theatre of the Crystal Palace, and other large Public Halls'. The advertisement describes the firm as 'inventors, patentees and makers of improved magic lanterns, dissolving view and lime-light apparatus', followed by the significant line, 'slides, and all kinds of lantern accessories, for sale or hire'. The Nelson Street address is described as the 'South London Optical Works'.

Another aspect of the business is suggested by Fig. 5, which is a drawing by Lloyd Roberts that appeared in the *Kentish Mercury* newspaper of 6 May 1932 (one of the family items given to me by Mrs Noakes junior). It shows a building situated at Billingsgate, Greenwich, which was reputedly built as a lighthouse. The name displayed above the lower windows at the left is clearly 'D. & E. Noakes'. Whether this was another branch of the same business, or another branch of the family in a different business, is not entirely clear.

I wrote an obituary for Gordon W. Noakes, which was published in *The Times* on Thursday 22 May 1958, six days after his death:

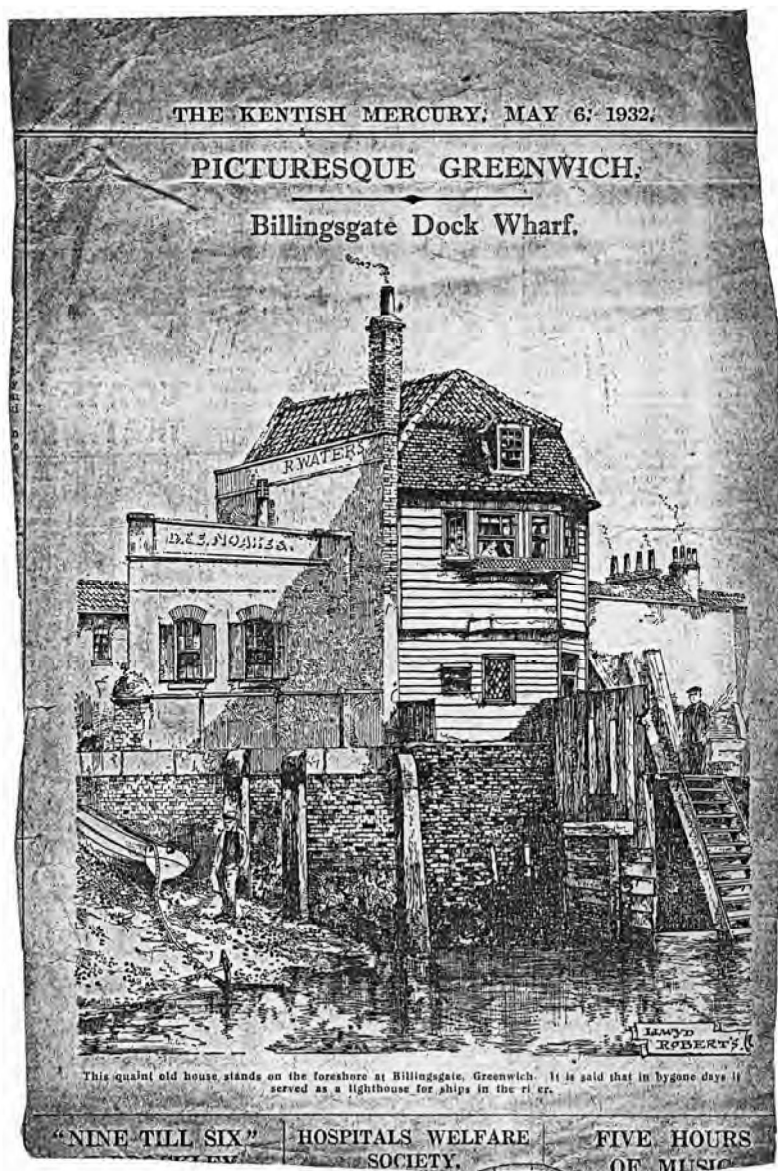
#### MR G.W. NOAKES

*The death of Mr G.W. Noakes, at Southend, on May 16, removes another pioneer of Britain's early film industry.*



Telephone—NEW CROSS 1327.  
**32 ELECTRICAL ENGINEERS G. NOAKES & Co GENERAL ENGINEERS 32**  
**G. Noakes & Co.**  
*Electrical and General  
Engineers,*  
32, London St., GREENWICH, S.E.  
Electric Lighting. . . Electric Bells.  
Electric Motors. Ignition Coils.  
**Motor Car Accessories and Repairs.**  
**Accumulators Charged & Repaired.**  
Scientific Instruments, Inventors' Models,  
etc., made and repaired.  
— Metal Turning and Machining for the trade. —  
16

3. G. Noakes & Co.'s advertisement from the 1910–11 *Greenwich Borough Guide*.



5. Llwyd Roberts' drawing of Billingsgate Dock Wharf, Greenwich, in 1932.

With a tradition of Society entertainers behind him he succeeded his father, D.W. Noakes, as lanternist at the Albert Hall, where they were responsible for the famous scene behind the singers of *Hiawatha*.

G.W. Noakes made many films, of which 25, ranging in duration from 60 to 90 seconds, are now in the National Film archives. At the beginning of the present century he demonstrated at the Paris Exposition the machine later to be christened by Mr John Betjeman, the Noakesoscope, a projector with four lenses in vertical series, a forerunner of both magic lantern and bioscope. Many lectures were given by father and son, and we had the privilege of being the only audience at the son's last lecture, some 18 months ago. He possessed several hundred plates three and a quarter inches square, mounted in mahogany frames, and hand painted with a fantastic delicacy and rich beauty. The four lenses allow the plates to 'dissolve' into one another, and thus to present a story – 'The Lodge', 'The Cross Channel Packet', waterfalls, 19th century English canals – all captured, and reproduced in sizes from two feet by three feet to the Albert Hall's 20 feet by 30 feet. The oldest 'moving picture', a pipe-smoking countryman, was made from a transfer, but yet so accurately made even then that the smoke issued exactly from the lips as the pipe was removed.

G.W. Noakes, although not possessed of the most robust health, was of a cheerful, friendly disposition, and with the deep love of beauty that recalls Moore's lines: 'Fond memory brings the light of other days around me.'

I also contributed a shorter obituary to the *Southend Standard* for 22 May 1958, and a short Tribute headed 'Historic Link' which appeared in the *Kentish Mercury*.

Gordon's interest in 19th-century canals, mentioned in the obituary, helps to explain Sir Arthur Elton's professional interest, and indeed that of Sir John Betjeman, who did so much to highlight the most beautiful facets of Victoriana. In a letter to me, Betjeman expressed pleasure at an article I had written about him which, he agreed, showed that he was not just in favour of Victoriana 'right or wrong'.

The quotation I used at the end of the obituary comes from the poem 'Oft in the Stilly Night' by Thomas Moore (1779–1852), which was published in his *National Airs* in 1815. The reference to *Hiawatha* is to the *Song of Hiawatha* published in 1855 by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82), the American author and poet whose vast output included travel books, prose romances and other long narrative poems.

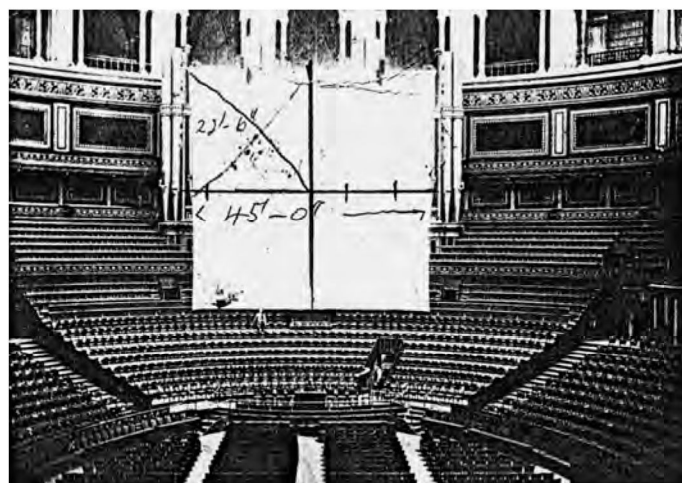
*Hiawatha* ran for a two-week season at the Royal Albert Hall every year from 1924 to 1939, except for 1926, the year of the General Strike. It was always produced by T.C. Fairbairn, who started his career as a singer with the Moody-Manners Opera Company and who died at the age of 103 in January 1978.

As I mentioned in the obituary, the Noakesoscope was capable of throwing an image ranging from 2 feet by 3 feet right up to 20 feet by 30 feet, large enough to be clearly seen by the whole audience in that vast auditorium of the Royal Albert Hall. One photograph (Fig. 6) taken by Noakes and given to me by Mrs Noakes junior after her husband died, shows the projection screen in position above the stage of the Albert Hall. The photograph has been marked in ink by one of the Noakes family to show the dimensions of the screen, which was 45 feet square, presumably to help in calculating the size of image required.

I have mentioned the items given to me by Mrs G.W. Noakes, some of which I brought with me when I gave a lecture to the Magic Lantern Society in 1986.<sup>2</sup> Mr and Mrs Noakes had always expressed the wish that I should own the Noakesoscope, but when Mr Noakes died a friend of the family insisted he was the only obvious recipient, so Mrs Noakes had to agree to his receiving it. When Mrs Noakes was leaving Southend to move to the Midlands,

she asked me to call on her so she could give me the family ephemera, to which I gladly agreed. Some of the items listed here give a greater idea of the versatility and interests of Noakes father and son:

- A silver pocket watch (Fig. 2) that belonged to Mr D.W. Noakes, hallmarked 1884, by Theobald of London – a rare example of a 24-hour watch, with numbers 1 to 24 arranged around its face.



6. The lantern screen in the Albert Hall, with handwritten notes by one of the Noakes family.

2. The talk was given at the 1986 Society AGM (18 January 1986). A video copy is available from the MLS video lending library.

- An album of photographs which seem to be of the Belgian coast, from my own knowledge of that country. This includes a strange postcard, 'Salut de Blankberghe', showing what at first glance appears to be a skull but which is in fact made up of the bodies of naked girls.
- About 40 postcard-size glass slides of Southend. I allowed Southend Library to make copies of some of them, and with permission some have since appeared in local history books.
- The Noakes family had a hobby of photographing wrecks in the River Thames with a camera taking half-plate size photographs, i.e. 11½ inches across by 9½ inches deep. These give a remarkable depth and clarity to the steamships and (in one or two cases) sailing ships.

Also included were many varied press clippings and a sheet of press opinions of the lectures delivered by the Noakes. One clipping from the 1890s, reviewing Mr D.W. Noakes's lecture at the Amersham Hall, New Cross, in south-east London, describes the items shown on the quadruple projector, but says the intention of showing further items of animated photographs on his electrograph had been forbidden by the London County Council because of fire risks! Another clipping from the *Hants County News* of 19 March 1898, covering D.W. Noakes's lecture at Earith, tells of images from the quadruple lens projector but this time with animated photographs from the cinematograph, with no apparent fire risk to the crowded hall at the British School. The evening's theme was 'the Victorian Era'.

Another clipping refers to a trip in Mr D.W. Noakes's steam yacht, with Mr Harry Williams and members of his dramatic company. The yacht went along canals and rivers through central England – to Stratford-upon-Avon, Birmingham, Chepstow and Bristol, and back via Reading – in a three-week trip intended to form an illustrated lecture with dissolving views.

The *Daily Advertiser* for 7 January 1899 carried a report of an entertainment organised by Mr E.W. Carpenter, chairman of the Licensed Victuallers' Association, to the inmates of the Licensed Victuallers' Asylum. Carpenter gave a lantern show 'and Mr D.W. Noakes, of Crystal Palace fame, greatly entertained with his cinematograph'. Another press account refers to Mr W.E. Carpenter (sic), proprietor of the Northampton Arms, organising an evening to entertain a thousand children at the Northampton Institute, Clerkenwell, where Mr D.W. Noakes showed his 'Fun on a Steam Launch' using a screen big enough to show a disc of 25 feet diameter. Obviously his lectures were well received, and reported in the national and City of London newspapers as well as the Kentish press.

I have mentioned the Noakes's interest in shipwrecks in the Thames. As well as the large photographs there are many small photos on this subject in the album, and several press clippings. Most important is the *Notes* of the 'Congres d'arch. et de Const. Nav'. This is a booklet of twelve pages, in French of course, headed 'Notes sur le Renflouage [Notes on refloating] par M. David W.

Noakes, Ingenieur, Londres'. Whilst dealing primarily with shipwrecks in the Thames, this scholarly and very technical paper covers all aspects of the subject, including tonnage, sites, docks and so on, so obviously D.W. Noakes was considered an authority on the subject.

After I had given my talk to the Magic Lantern Society in 1986, Lester Smith kindly sent me a letter from Mr Dennis Hubbard, of Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire, about an elderly gentleman called Bob Grace, who lived in Tring, and a dress shop there run by a Mrs Noakes. While talking with members of the Tring Photographic Society about lanterns, which Bob Grace used to show, another member called Ken Day remembered the Noakes family starting at Greenwich. His own wife, Joan Day, was a niece of Mrs Noakes, who was, he said, aged 90 and still living at Southend! Joan used to control the lighting for the Noakes's Albert Hall lectures. Mr Hubbard also said that Mr Noakes assisted John Logie Baird in his first television endeavours, and that the Days had been offered a lantern, but it was too large for them to accommodate.

It was a privilege to know Gordon W. Noakes and his wife and to learn at first hand so much of the early days of the world of the magic lantern and cinema.

**John KENNEDY MELLING** is a critic, broadcaster, historian and lecturer on a wide variety of subjects, particularly theatre history and the London trade guilds. He has also written plays for stage and broadcast, film scripts and successful crime fiction.

#### A PICTORIAL POSTSCRIPT – ED.

Only two photographs of the 'Noakesoscope' are known to exist, taken by Brian Coe during a show at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in December 1961.<sup>3</sup> These (Figs 7 and 8 below) show the huge lantern being operated by its then owners, the Messrs Harold (father and son), one of whom is obscured behind the lantern. Although the photos are quite dark and indistinct, the four lens tubes of the lantern can be seen against the pale background of the younger Mr Harold's jumper.

The photos appear to show the process of adjustment of the lenses to register their images on the screen prior to the show, rather than slides actually being shown, though the second photo also reveals some distinctive boxes holding a large number of slides. Presumably the illuminant was electric by this time, if not originally. It is also tempting to imagine that the quadriunial body could have consisted of two stacked biunials, much in the same way that many triunial designs have a detachable single stage secured to the top of a biunial body, to allow for easier transportation and storage.

In spite of enquiries by several members of the Society over the years, the subsequent history and/or current whereabouts of this not-so-mythical beast remain one of the great unsolved mysteries of modern lantern scholarship

3. This 1961 event, a 'Programme of slides covering the most important events in the Life of Queen Victoria', is described in a little more detail, along with some useful references to the Noakes family business, in Hermann Hecht (ed. Ann Hecht), *Pre-Cinema History: An Encyclopaedia and Annotated Bibliography of the Moving Image Before 1896* (London: Bowker Saur, 1993), item 570.

7, 8. The two Messrs Harold working with the Noakesoscope at Hammersmith in 1961.

