

# COVENTRY AND MIDLAND PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY PRIZE-WINNING LANTERN SLIDES

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During the 1880s, 3¼in x 3¼in became the standard measurement for the manufacture and production of photographic magic lantern slides, at least in this country. However, there was no standard measurement for the boxes which were made to accommodate these slides. They varied in length, width, height and internal design. Anyone who has attempted to stack twenty assorted slide boxes will be well aware of this problem!

The slide storage box I spotted in the centre of the window display of an antique shop in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1990 was larger than anything I had previously seen. About a dozen photographic slides had been propped against this large wooden black box. The lid was open, revealing a number of inner slide compartments. There was a price ticket but, as is so often the case, this had been accidentally turned over.

The box, measuring 25in x 18in x 5¼in (64cm x 46cm x 13cm), is of a very solid construction, with reinforced edges and strafe strips. Seven bolts fixed into plates in the base section pass through holes in the lid, which would have been secured with wing nuts. This design was modified at a later date when the rear pin was removed and brass hinges fitted. There is no sign of any other modification or repair having taken place. A brass handle, now broken, originally allowed the box to be carried as a heavy-duty suitcase. It would have required some strength to carry as the total weight exceeded 55lbs (20kgms). Most interesting, however, is the somewhat faded large, bold lettering painted on the lid: 'PHOTOGRAPHY' PRIZE LANTERN SLIDES. COVENTRY ENGLAND. There is also evidence of numerous adhesive railway company labels, which would have been attached and removed as each successive journey was completed and the box once again returned to its home base in Coventry.

On lifting the heavy, close-fitting hinged lid, ten inner slide storage compartments are revealed, each with slots for eighteen slides. The lids for these internal sections are constructed from contemporary packaging and bear the manufacturer's label with the wording: 'Fry's Light-tight "safety"'. Darretts Patent (Appa) Samuel Fry & Co Ltd, 6 Chandos Street, London W.C.' Although I have examined several hundred photographic and lantern advertisements during the period 1880 to 1905, I have not been able as yet to date this particular version of Fry's dry plates. Samuel Fry was advertising some of their patent lantern plates in the lantern press of the period 1885 to 1889. An example can be found at the end of *The Magic Lantern Manual* by W.I. Chadwick (second edition, March 1885) and another in *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, 15 June 1889.

I wonder to what extent such large storage boxes had been in use? Is it possible that the idea for the design of the Coventry and Midland Photographic Society travelling exhibition box came from an article by W.J. Stainthorp, printed in *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal & Photographic Enlarger* for September 1896? He gave a description of a slidé box made to his specification by a local carpenter: 'It consists of a lidless box that when lined with baize holds seven dozen slides... The cover to this consists of a similar lidless box fitting easily over the box proper, like the cardboard boxes in which dry plates are packed.' However, the Coventry box is over twice this size and has a different interior construction.

The ten inner cardboard lids provide some interesting additional information. On each, two

printed labels had been fixed by the Photographic Society. The first indicates the number and topic of each competition class; for example, CLASS 3: GENRE. The second gummed label contains three sets of information: the prize category (1st, 2nd and 3rd); the pseudonym of each winner (for example, 'Obah', 'Gib' and 'Chromos') and, lastly, the full name and address of each winner. Without this detailed information it might have been assumed that this was a collection of slides taken by Coventry photographers. However, the inclusion of several photographers of national reputation and the wide-ranging geographical area of the entrants puts a totally different perspective on this box of prize-winning slides. It had now become quite an interesting find.

The box was designed to accommodate 180 slides and fortunately the majority were still present. In addition, a foolscap manuscript catalogue listing

each slide, class by class, was contained within two sheets of linen-backed paper. The information in the catalogue corresponds with the information on the labels. Any collector or researcher needs some luck from time to time. That morning in Stratford-upon-Avon my luck was in! The antique dealer had intended to discard the catalogue as the covers were considerably worn and stained and he felt it might distract from the excellent quality of many of the slides when on display. It was only because I asked if he knew anything about the origin of the collection that the manuscript was mentioned. On searching through a large box of papers and junk destined for the refuse collection, the missing catalogue was found and reunited with the slides. The following week might have been too late.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, photographic clubs and societies were becoming increasingly popular. They had been established in





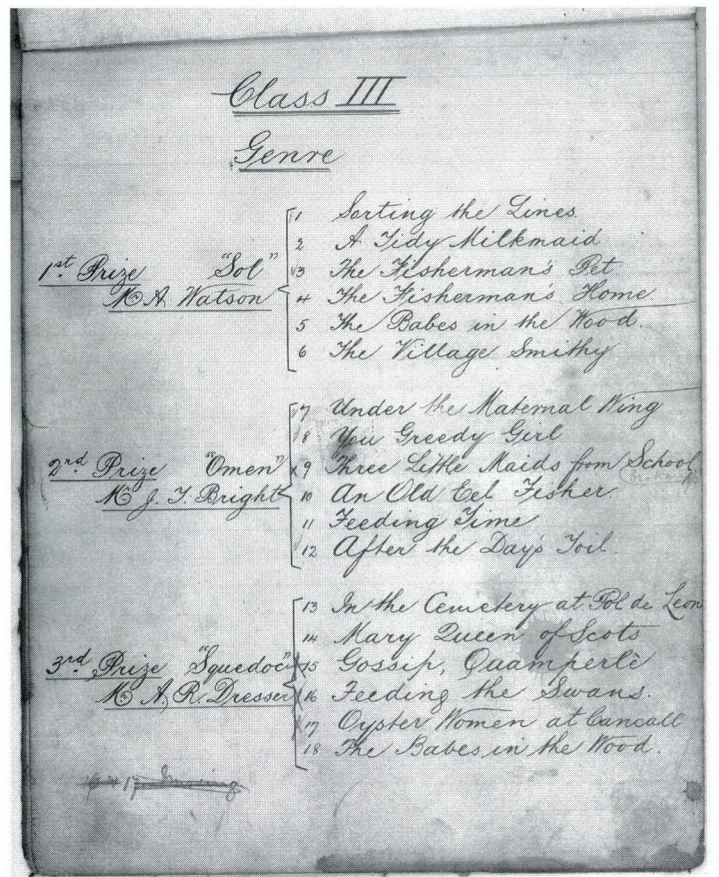
most areas of the country and by 1900 over 300 are listed. There was a standard form of rules, aims and constitution. The holding of annual photographic competitions was an important function and many had a lanternists' section. There was a clear attempt by the many thousands of members to produce work of the highest standard and to enter their best efforts for both local and national competitions. The work of the various prize winners was put on display by the local photographic society and exhibited to members of the public. A development arising from these competitions was the establishment of loan exhibitions. Margaret Harker, in her book *The Linked Ring*, suggests that by the late 1890s loan exhibitions of photographs were a feature of the calendar of events of both photographic clubs and arts societies.

The Coventry and Midland Photographic Society was founded in 1883. On 10, 11, 12 and 13 October 1888, the Society held its first major public Photographic Exhibition in the Old Grammar School in Coventry. It was open for twelve hours each day. At intervals throughout the four evenings of the exhibition, magic lantern displays were given. They must have been shows of some standing as several lanternists were involved and selections of music were played. The programme included slides lent by Messrs York & Son, G.W. Wilson & Co, and other manufacturers. Lantern slides by members of the Society were also included in these performances.

It is not clear if the prize slides contained in my travelling slide exhibition were the winners of the competition in 1888, 1889 or subsequent years. In spite of an extensive search through copies of the *Coventry Herald and Free Press* for the years 1888 to 1900, no detailed account is printed for photographic competitions after 1888.

Another useful source would have been the *Coventry Standard*, the city's other newspaper at that time, but a full run of copies does not appear to exist – only various press cuttings survive. On 1 November 1889, the *Coventry Standard* reported that the Society's second public exhibition provided a remarkably good show. The reporter went on to state that 'professional and amateur work is found on the same line, and some of the exhibits are considered among the best specimens of English photography.' A detailed description is then given of some of the winning photographs; for example, 'Waiting for the Fishing Boats'. The description of 'women standing in natural attitudes' with in the distance 'the dim outline of a fishing smack', matches a Marine class slide in my prize-winning collection. Was it possible that a lantern-slide version of the same, or a similar prize-winning print, was also entered in the slide competition for 1889? In a detailed report of this exhibition printed on 1 November 1889 it was stated that by the date of the opening it had not been possible to finalise the competition section for lantern slides. Unfortunately no reason is offered for this delay.

Although I have made numerous attempts to contact the surviving families of founder members and the first office holders in the Coventry and Midland Photographic Society, and examined various scrapbooks (including seven



belonging to Councillor Andrews, the Society's President) and other documents, I have been unable to resolve a number of questions. Perhaps additional information will come to light as a result of this article. In spite of these frustrations, the magic lantern slides from this travelling exhibition remain a superb record of the work of these fine Victorian photographers. A small selection of their work is included here.



'Waiting for the Fishing Boats', 2nd Prize, Class VI: Marine, Mr Edgar G. Lee ('Gossamer')



'The Fisherman's Pet', 1st prize, Class III: Genre, Mr Archibald Watson ('Sol')



'The Sisters', 1st prize, Class I: Home Portraiture, Mr S. Francis Clarke ('Bluebeard')



'Sorting the Lines', 1st prize, Class III: Genre, Mr Archibald Watson ('Sol')



'A Portrait', 2nd prize, Class I: Home Portraiture, Mr Fred W. Muncey ('Oakleigh')



'The Fisherman's Home', 1st prize, Class III: Genre, Mr Archibald Watson ('Sol')