

'IT WAS THE VICAR WHAT DONE IT'

Brian Widdowson

I BOUGHT MY FIRST MAGIC LANTERN two or three years ago. It came complete with a box of a hundred or so slides. When I had sorted the slides into some sort of order I found that there was a strong historical and religious bias to the collection. I had a complete photographic set of *The Tower of London*; most of a black and white lithographed set entitled *Reformation of England; The Spanish Armada*; and various other historical scenes and figures. There were also a good number of slides depicting Protestant martyrs and their fate. It would have been perfectly possible to assemble an ad hoc set entitled *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. I resisted the temptation.

I could not help wondering what kind of person originally owned my lantern and the slides that came with it. One of the photographic slides in my collection depicted a Victorian vicar complete with dog collar and beard. The quality of the slide suggested that an amateur photographer might have taken the original photograph. Could it be that the reverend gentleman depicted in the slide was once the original owner of my collection of slides?

I remembered that during the 1940s, when I attended Sunday School, the local vicar came every month or so with his projector and gave us a film show. This projector was equipped to show black and white 35mm filmstrips, one frame at a time. The subjects shown were of a religious nature, usually depicting missionary work or life in the Bible Lands. In the late nineteenth century it was common for the local vicar to own a magic lantern, and this tradition evidently outlasted the use of glass slides.

One of my other interests is local history, and I knew that in my village a few parish magazines had survived from the late nineteenth century and early 1900s. I searched them for references to magic lantern shows and to see if there was a connection with the local vicar. The earliest reference I found to a magic lantern show in the *Long Bennington and Foston Parish Magazine* was from January 1898. In that month the Ministering Children's League and Girls' Friendly Society were treated to a reading of the work of the Girls' Friendly Society,

illustrated with a Magic Lantern, and enlivened by songs and recitations. In the second part of the evening, Mrs Grote illustrated her recitation and reading with the magic lantern.

At first sight it does not look as though the local vicar was involved in this show, but since the local vicar was also the magazine editor it could have been a case of false modesty.

There is also the possibility that another vicar was involved. Mrs Grote, who gave the recitation in the second part of the evening's entertainment, was Long Bennington's Lady of the Manor. In 1898 she had been widowed for some years and at the time was keeping company with a Reverend Joyce of Cheniston Gardens, Kensington, Middlesex. The happy couple were married the following year and Mrs Grote became Mrs Grote-Joyce. Perhaps it might have been the Reverend Joyce's magic lantern that had been used on this occasion?

There can be no doubt about who operated the lantern in April 1899, when a piece in the magazine reads:

Waifs and Strays Society – A Lecture 'Lincolnshire Past and Present' was given in schoolroom on 28th February by Rev. A.

Mrs Grote (centre, with child on her knee), Lady of the Manor, with members of Long Bennington Mothers' Union



Hunt, Secretary of Waifs and Strays Society. The Magic Lantern views were excellent. There was a Collection on behalf of St Hugh's Home at Lincoln, which amounted to £1. 5s. 2d.

This time it was definitely 'the vicar what done it'!

The vicar, however, was not involved in the magic lantern show given to the Ministering Children's League in December 1899. The parish magazine tells us

The entertainment was an unqualified success thanks to Mr Ouvry's excellent magic lantern. It made up for the unfortunate mishap which Mr Piercy had with his lantern the previous night. Sorrow was expressed for Mr Piercy. The League was able to hand him £1. 10s. for the Mission he represented.

What unfortunate mishap Mr Piercy had with his lantern is not recorded. Older members of the village believe that it caught fire. This event is just the sort of memory that would be passed down through the generations and it seems very likely that this was the case.

I had a little more luck with a magic lantern show given to the Sunday School children in January 1905:

Children's' Christmas Treat arranged for the Festival of the Holy Innocents; tea in the schoolroom at 5 o'clock. The children were joined by their parents and others interested in the Sunday Schools and Bible Classes at 6 o'clock. The Vicar reviewed the year's work – 31 children gained prizes. Afterwards, the Vicar and Mrs Rees exhibited their Magic Lantern, with slides depicting well-known nursery tales, and a few games brought the party to a close.

The magic lantern and slides clearly belonged to the vicar and his wife. Why were there no 'well-known nursery tales' among my slides, if they were such typical subjects?

In March 1907 a new name appears in the parish magazine in connection with magic lantern shows. The following account, about a Christmas treat given to the Ministering Children's League in another village mentions a Miss Way:

An account was given by Miss Way of Christmas at Chapel Court Mission Room, Borough High St., on Sat. 13th January. Tea for the children, a magic lantern show, and then distribution of presents – garments made by the Long Bennington Ministering Children's League workers.

The involvement of the Way family was mentioned again in January 1910. At the Sunday School's Annual Christmas Treat on December 30th, 'tea was followed by a Magic Lantern, exhibited by Mr Way'.

Hugh Way was a close relation, probably a nephew, of Mrs Grote-Joyce, the Lady of the Manor. It is possible that Hugh Way was using a magic lantern that once belonging to the Reverend Joyce. The Reverend Joyce had died in 1903, three years after marrying Mrs Grote. The lady was not lucky in love.

It would seem from the evidence in the parish magazines that the magic lantern was indeed a popular instrument with Long Bennington's Victorian and Edwardian vicars. If this were generally the case it would go a long way to explain the vast amount of magic lantern slides with a religious theme still in existence. The fleeting descriptions in the parish magazines are all too brief, but perhaps by building up a study of these local references we can begin to see how the slides were used and how they fitted into the fabric of everyday life. In English villages of this time, the vicar was a central figure, and his involvement with the magic lantern would make it an important part of the village scene.

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'The Vicar' as portrayed in the lantern slide