

AN OBSCURE CAMERA OBSCURA

Lester Smith



1. Stereoscopic photograph showing group by camera obscura building (Lester Smith Collection)

I HAVE HAD A STEREOSCOPIC PHOTOGRAPH (1) in my collection for a long time, not knowing what it was but believing it to be very interesting. I recently showed it to a stereocard collector friend who had acquired a collection of early stereoscopic photographic cards of Malvern (the spa town in Worcestershire, England), one of which happened to be the same image as mine. A date around the 1860s or 1870s was suggested. This would seem sensible from the crinoline dresses of the ladies and the stovepipe hats of the gentlemen. The hatless chap in the middle would appear to be the owner of the wooden construction. It looks like quite an auspicious occasion, maybe the inauguration ceremony of that building.

I had guessed by now that the building could be a camera obscura, and wrote to Malvern Public Library asking for any information. They replied with several photocopies of articles published in the *Malvern Gazette* in 1937 and 1938. The first newspaper showed a crude drawing of 'The House on the Beacon' with the caption 'Does any reader remember this?' (2). This had prompted several replies, and a picture appeared of a square stone building with a turret on top. Later I acquired, from another collector of Malvern history, a copy of the photograph reproduced in the *Gazette* (3), and this clearly shows 'The Camera Obscura, Admission 3d.' There is a window in the side of the building next to it that appears to be full of photographs. The ladder and steps on the roof are curious – possibly there to allow cleaning or adjustment of the prism or mirror, perhaps to place a telescope for people to observe the landscape.

Piecing together the various pieces of information revealed that the camera obscura was built by a Mr John Down at a cost of £800, and that it was erected in the early 1870s. It consisted of a building intended as a refreshment shop which could seat 200 persons, with a receptacle for a camera obscura. It was known as 'The Beacon Building', but more personally as 'Down's Castle'. An advertisement (4) from *Malvern Commercial Prospectuses*, c.1873, refers to John Down Senior as 'an artist in photographs' who also ran the camera obscura and 'provided telescopes for viewing the scenery and the wonderful



2. Illustration from *Malvern Gazette*, 13 November 1937 (Malvern Public Library)



3. Photograph reproduced in *Malvern Gazette*, 1938

32 MALVERN COMMERCIAL PROSPECTUSES.

THE WORCESTERSHIRE BEACON.

JOHN DOWN, SEN.,
ARTIST IN PHOTOGRAPHY,

Is now prepared to take his far-famed Photographic Groups, which stand unrivalled for Natural Backgrounds; and being the Highest Photographic Establishment in the world, with such a series of beautiful rocks, Mr. D. runs photograph under the most extreme difficulties, and he invites inspection of his extraordinary Groups of Children and Pinnacles.

THE CAMERA OBSCURA is now open for exhibition, and being at the elevation of 1,396 feet will be interesting to visitors to the renowned Beacon. Admission 3d.

Mr. Down will provide Telescopes for viewing the Scenery, and the wonderful Spots on the Sun's disc, and will give a description of the principal objects of interest to visitors if required.

The largest and best selection of Malvern Photographic Views kept by Mr. Down on the Worcestershire Beacon.

4. John Down Senior, entry in *Malvern Commercial Prospectuses*, c.1873



5. Postcard, 'Tea Rooms at top of Worcestershire Beacon, Malvern', c.1905

spots on the Sun's disc'. Another advertisement in the same publication is for John Down Junior, 'landscape and portrait artist', who operated from Rose Villa further down the hill.

Unfortunately for Mr Down, the Malvern Hills Act was passed about this time and he was instructed by the Malvern Hills Conservators to remove his building.² Much of the material was used in the building of the Broomhill Hotel lower down the hill, first known as The Observatory. John Down appears to have run his photographic business from here for a time. In 1885 he requested to be allowed to erect another building on the summit of the Beacon. This time the Conservators relented as long as it was constructed in wood. They also insisted that he built it first in a quarry close to his home so that they could inspect it prior to its being placed on the summit! When completed, Mr Down ran it as the 'Tea Rooms and Camera Obscura', and it probably appeared much like the view shown in a 1905 postcard (5).

By 1888 the elder John Down had become ill, and he died a few months later. In July 1889 Isaac Price, the brother of one Philip Price who had built the camera obscura for Down, became its tenant. For many years he also acted as Haywarden (an official who looks after fences, etc.) for the Hills Conservators. After his death, his widow continued running the tea rooms until she died in 1911, aged 76, and the tenancy was then taken over by her son and his wife until 1932. This was then transferred to Miss Irene Taylor, a niece, and twenty years later the tea rooms were described as 'in a very sorry state' until they were rescued and renovated by Mr Archie Ballard. In 1989 there was a 'magnificent fire' and they were reduced to ashes! According to a frequent visitor to the café the camera obscura itself was removed long before the fire, though its whereabouts are still a mystery.

6. Photograph showing original camera obscura building on St Anne's Delight, above buildings of St Anne's Well, Malvern



But none of these fine buildings looks like the first stereoscopic photograph. In that view a hill can faintly be seen running behind the camera obscura, therefore it cannot be on the summit. The Malvern local historian Brian Iles recently found a photograph (6) which gives a slightly later view of it, and shows very well its position overlooking the Plain of Malvern. Here the same wooden building can be seen situated on a natural vantage point known as 'St Anne's Delight', above and behind St Anne's Well. Another very interesting item found by Mr Iles is an advertisement (7) for Down and Sons, taken from Norman May's *Malvern Guide* of 1870 (Norman May was another well-known local photographer). This shows that Down and Son were established at St Anne's Well Studio, using the pure stream water for their photographic work. Their advertisement states that the better light available there means that no headrest is required to hold a sitter in position during a long exposure. The camera obscura is also mentioned, open daily with the admission reduced to 3d.

ST ANN'S WELL

PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIO.

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DOWN AND SONS

Beg to return their sincere thanks to the Nobility, Clergy, Gentry, Visitors, and Inhabitants of Malvern and its vicinity, for their kind patronage for the last eight years, during which time Photography has made rapid strides, and that they are now prepared to take Photographs from

MICROSCOPIC TO LIFE SIZE,

and that they have arranged with a first-class London Artist for colouring the larger sizes; and they also beg to draw SPECIAL attention to two important advantages, which can only be obtained at St Ann's Well Studio, viz.—1. The exceedingly PURE running stream of water, whereby the prints are immersed and washed for twenty-four hours, to be cleansed from the Sulphide of Silver, being the only safety for their durability. 2. The light being so much better at such an elevation, that no *head-rest* is required, only one-half of the usual exposure being necessary, consequently sitters are more likely to have the natural contour and expression, which can only be acquired under such an advantage. Children and Groups taken with the *Instantaneous* process, specimens of which may be seen at the Studio.

Down & Sons venture to say that they have been more successful in the above particular branches than the majority of Photographers.

Printing, Toning, Fixing, Mounting, and Rolling done for Gentlemen Amateurs.

The Art of Photography Taught in Three Lessons. For terms, apply at St Ann's Well.

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**THE CAMERA OBSCURA, NEAR ST ANN'S WELL,**

Is open daily, and the price of Admission is now reduced to 3d., and Visitors are urged not to leave Malvern without paying a visit to this WONDERFUL OPTICAL Instrument, where they will be delighted with the most beautiful Panoramic Scenery in Europe, and can also be amused with the various incidents occurring on the hills.

NEWTONIAN ASTRONOMICAL REFLECTING TELESCOPES made to order. PHOTOGRAPHIC LENSES and CAMERAS for Sale; also STEREOSCOPES and MICROSCOPES, and every variety of Views of Malvern, with an assortment of Fancy Goods, kept at St Ann's Well Bazaar.

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7. Advertisement for Down and Sons, photographers, from Malvern Guide c.1870

Clearly some personal investigation was required. I set out early in February, following a sign in Great Malvern pointing to St Anne's Well. After a short steep walk I came across a charming octagonal building (8) which was open for coffee and hot snacks. Walking past to the left of this building, I tried to find a vantage point that might fit the view shown in the 1860s photograph. Many more trees and much undergrowth have appeared since, but my photo (9) seems to match quite well. The rear extension to the octagonal building, with the chimneys and dormer window (now obscured by brambles), and the distinctive stone wall are very similar, but have obviously been replaced from time to time. The path leading out of the picture to the left (the young lady in each picture offers a study in changing fashions!) bends round and carries on up to the summit of the



8. St Anne's Well, Malvern, 2002 (photo: Lester Smith)



9. St Anne's Well, Malvern, 2002 (photo: Lester Smith).  
Compare this view with that shown in 7

Beacon, while a branch path leads to the beauty spot overlooking Happy Valley where the camera obscura stood.

The St Anne's Well building itself houses a 'Crystal Fountain' overflowing onto the floor and running to a pool below the buildings. A marble plaque above the fountain was laid by Lady Emily Foley, Lady of the Manor of Great Malvern, in October 1892. Presumably this was the date the fountain was installed and the whole structure rebuilt and dedicated; an information board gives the general history of the site. St Anne is traditionally known as mother of the Virgin Mary and is also widely recognised as the patron saint of wells and springs. It was largely due to the abundance of pure water that a Priory Church was established here in 1460 and consecrated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and her mother, St Anne. The pure water contains no minerals, and led two doctors to establish popular water cure centres in 1842, putting Malvern firmly on the map as a growing Victorian town. The octagonal annex was built in 1860 to provide shelter and facilities for visitors. In 1963 a move was made to demolish all the buildings, but the Malvern Hills Conservators defeated the motion and restoration work was done instead. In 1998 a project was initiated to overhaul the plumbing of the well and to landscape the surrounding area.

Looking again at the first camera obscura picture (1), the turret is slightly different to those in the other pictures (3 and 5). Is that an adjustable mirror on top of it, or a telescope? The later pictures show

a roof with a short spire and the sighting hole for the mirror or prism is clearly visible. Maybe time will reveal more details of its long and varied history, but for the time being this long-forgotten optical attraction remains a slightly 'obscure camera obscura'.

The author would like to express many thanks to the staff of Malvern Public Library and Mr Brian Iles, and acknowledge information drawn from Valerie Goodbury's book *West Malvern: A History of the Village* (published by the author, 1994).

**Lester SMITH** was a founding member of the MLS in January 1977. He has been collecting antiques since the age of 12, but his life changed for the better when he discovered lantern slides in 1972. He is currently the Society's Programme Secretary, and has organised its venues and programmes since 1985 and its Convention exhibitions in 1990, 1997 and 2001.

All illustrations from the Lester Smith Collection.

#### NOTES

1. Mr Brian Iles very kindly supplied me with laser scanned images of his photos. Unless otherwise credited, the illustrations for this article are taken from his collection.
2. The Malvern Hills Act 1884, an early exercise in conservation legislation, stated that 'From and ever after the passing of this Act no enclosure shall be made or building erected on the lands subject to this Act and subject to the provisions of this Act the Conservators may at all times take all necessary measures to keep the said lands as open spaces free from enclosure and building ...'