

ON THE TRAIL OF THE NOAKESOSCOPE

Mike Smith

THERE HAVE BEEN A COUPLE OF REFERENCES to the 'Noakesoscope' quadruple lantern in this Journal over the years, and in the most recent one from 2005 (John Kennedy Melling, 'The Noakes family and the "Noakesoscope"', *NMLJ* Vol. 10 No. 1) what were then the only known photographs of what the editor called 'this not-so-mythical beast' were reproduced. Those photos, taken in 1961 by the late Brian Coe, showed the lantern in use at a charity show given at the Hammersmith Lyric Theatre, London, operated by its then owners the Messrs Harold.

But as can be seen on this page, a more recent photograph has now come to light, along with some further clues about this unique lantern. As far as is known, this individual instrument is the only lantern with four lenses ever to have been constructed.

The lantern appeared in a London exhibition entitled 'The camera and Dr Barnardo', which ran from July to November 1974, organised by the National Portrait Gallery. The exhibition was a celebration of the centenary of the opening of the Photographic Department of Dr Barnardo's children's charity in 1874. Barnardo's use of photography to record the children who passed through his institution was ground-breaking at the time. A set of professional photographs of the exhibits survives in the NPG's archive (reference NPG32/93/14).

Only one of the photos shows the lantern itself, and indeed it seems to have played a fairly minor part in the exhibition – it was the only lantern-related artefact present, apart from images of a couple of slides. The Noakesoscope is not even the central subject of the photo, but nonetheless some details can be discerned:

- the lantern is perhaps about three feet (90cm) in height, not significantly more than the average trinitail;
- it was displayed without its chimney cowl, perhaps to allow fitting in the display case;
- the wooden body appears to be in one piece (i.e. not demountable into separate 'biunial' units), with a plate marked 'Noakes' Patent' halfway up;
- the other items in the display case are a single wood-framed slide and a group of three or four metal cylinders, possibly another set of objective lenses to give a different 'throw';
- the NPG photograph had the note 'lantern used to project Barnardo slides' on the back.

One question that comes to mind is this: if the exhibition curator only wanted a representative lantern and a couple of sample slides to illustrate the fact that Barnardo also published photos as slides, why would he or she choose a completely unique and highly elaborate item for that simple purpose?

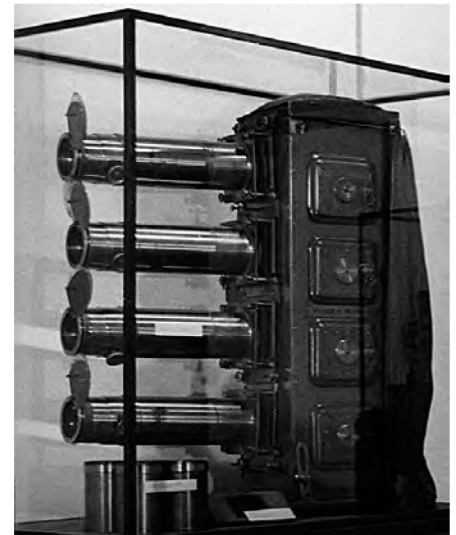
The answer may be found in the professional relationship between Noakes and Barnardo. As reported in the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal* of March 1894 (Vol. 5 No. 58, p.61), Noakes was the lanternist for 'the first lantern show in the Royal Albert Hall' on 11 January 1894, in which slides were shown to accompany the Annual General Meeting of Dr Barnardo's Homes. So perhaps, if the curator was aware of this relationship, and was somehow aware of the existence of a special Noakes lantern, only this lantern would do for the exhibition! There is no evidence, incidentally, that the quadruple lantern was used on that occasion – it would surely have been mentioned in the *OMLJ* report – and indeed no contemporary references to the lantern or its use are known at present, nor even the date when it was built. How Barnardo and Noakes became connected is also not known, although in the 1880s Noakes also worked as a lanternist for the Rev. Charles Spurgeon, a Minister in Greenwich and son of the evangelist Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who was a friend of Barnardo.

Efforts to locate this magnificent lantern are ongoing, though so far it continues to be an elusive quarry. There is evidence (in private correspondence which I have seen) that the Noakesoscope and its accompanying slides were still in existence in 1994, and at that time were being cared for by an owner who understood their importance, but after that the trail has gone temporarily cold.

Enquiries will continue...



The 'Noakesoscope' lantern on display at the National Portrait Gallery exhibition in 1974 (photo by Clive Boursnell; copyright National Portrait Gallery, London)



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



Mike SMITH is Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the Magic Lantern Society, and has been an enthusiastic hunter of the elusive Noakesoscope for some years.