

THE SPRING MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

SWEDENBORG SOCIETY, LONDON
SATURDAY 30 APRIL 2016

Mary Ann Auckland

On an unusually sunny April day the Magic Lantern Society met at the Swedenborg in central London – a venue that has become the regular one for this meeting. A total of sixty-one members and guests attended (ten apologies) with fierce competition for the 'who has come furthest' contest – won by Barry Hancox from New Zealand, with a special mention for Mrs Yoriko Iwata from Japan. The good news was that the black-out capabilities at the venue had improved since last year, leading to a great improvement in the quality of projected images. However this was not an issue for the first item on the agenda – an auction of items, principally from the estate of Robert Reeve, an MLS member for many years.

One member recalled Robert finding a robin nesting in one of his biunial lanterns – so he left the family undisturbed until they left home. A number of slides, books and lanterns (guaranteed without robins) were sold by our expert auctioneer John 'no arguments' Townsend, in his own inimitable style. The proceeds were split

between the MLS and the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society. Altogether the auction raised over £380 for the MLS – a very generous gesture by the Reeves family with special thanks to Robert's son Mark who donated the items.

Next Peter Gillies assisted by Gordon Casbeard gave us his own selection of inventions that changed the world in the nineteenth century, illustrated by appropriate magic lantern slides. Peter chose photography, the development of celluloid, package tour holidays and the safety bicycle.

The section on photography featured Graystone Bird (1862–1943), whose much-admired work was largely for magic lanterns only, and some extraordinary slides of precariously perched rock climbers that begged the

question of where the photographer plus weighty equipment were positioned. He then focused on John Benjamin Dancer (1812–87) and the development of the microphotograph. These were used to pass information into Paris during the famous siege of 1870–1. Information, including the front page of *The Times* newspaper with its famous adverts, was sent to Tours, converted to microphotograph, taken to a location near Paris, conveyed by carrier pigeon and the microphotographs projected by magic lantern inside the city. The pigeons were then taken out of Paris via balloon, which had its risks

with some hapless balloonists last seen disappearing over the horizon, miles off course. *The Times* admitted eventually that it had oversold its service and many adverts never left Tours.

Next we heard about Alexander Parkes (1813–90) credited with inventing the first man-made plastic, Parkesine, which he patented

in 1856. An early advert promoting shirts with a 'magic ever-new collar' coated in the plastic was unconvincing but ping pong balls proved more practical. Parkesine changed its name to Xylonite and was, of course, a trade name for celluloid – and the rest is cinema history. Peter showed us examples of the 'complete cinematograph for home use' and cinema advertising slides which he believed were used as late as the 1970s.

Moving onto the package holiday, Peter dismissed claims to its invention by Thomas Cook organising travel for temperance groups or Cunard offering passenger berths alongside their core mail business. No, the true inventor was none other than the Regent Street Polytechnic offering a Polytechnic Special from 1856 that took students abroad on cheap trips. This became the Polytechnic Touring Association – complete with steamships and then planes – and eventually part of Lunn Poly, now Thomson Holidays. Along the way we saw the wicker-seated interior, with curtains, of a pre-WWII package flight and heard about the first in-flight movie in 1925.

The last section was devoted to the safety bicycle, invented in 1884. This widened many people's horizons, enabling them to work and relax much further afield – thereby increasing the gene pool! Women proved they could master the technique and gained both more respect and more independence. A number of unusual slides showed the Rudge tandem tricycle, a 'poser' bike enabling the rider to remain 'standing' and an early cycling club.

Next Mervyn Heard presented the story of *The Yorkshireman and the Irish Ghost*. Having acquired the slides, Mervyn went in search of the story and its author. Although on none of the usual listings, he eventually tracked it down in an 1874 edition of the monthly *St Paul's Magazine* – edited from 1866 to 1870 by Anthony Trollope. It was credited to the author of *If I Were Dictator* in a back issue, which he duly found too. This imagined the author being approached by Prime Minister Gladstone to be dictator for six months and proposing a second Great Exhibition – of adulterated goods and scams – thus proving who are the finest swindlers in the world.



The author of this piece was John Edward Jenkins (1838–1910), a radical Liberal MP and lawyer known for his satirical writing. His most famous work of fiction was *Ginx's Baby: his birth and other misfortunes* first published in 1870 and re-issued thirty-three times in two years. It condemns the rivalry of various philanthropic institutions as they utterly fail to rescue a baby born into abject poverty – but this was not considered suitable magic lantern fare.



We were then treated to the highly entertaining slide story of how the Yorkshireman, and his dog, outwitted the incumbent ghost of an Irish tinker in a property our hero wished to purchase – unhaunted.

Dolly Whilems and Derek Adams took us on a

tour of artist Wilhelm Busch's haunts in the Hanover area of modern-day Germany, beginning at the Wilhelm Busch Deutsches Museum für Karikatur und Zeichenkunst (caricature and satire) in the city itself. Busch is celebrated in Germany as an artist, author and 'grandfather' of comics and comic books – but Dolly and Derek could find little reference to magic lantern slides.



Busch was born, the eldest of seven children, on 15 April 1832 in the village of Wiedensahl. The family's house was saved in 1930, refurbished, modernised and opened to the public. The room where he was born, his cradle, original woodblocks for printing his drawings and facsimile notebooks are all on display there. At the age of nine he was sent to an uncle in Ebergötzen to be educated and here Wilhelm met Erich Bachmann, the son of the

water mill owner. The two boys were immortalised as Busch's Max and Moritz, appearing in *Max and Moritz: a story in 7 tricks* first published in 1865. This immensely popular book has been translated into thirty languages – but proved less popular in Ebergötzen where the locals recognised themselves in the stories, for example the local tailor as a character who ends up in the river.

Busch's stories have also been criticised for being sadistic, cruel to animals and 'unsuitable for children' with the boys getting away with things they shouldn't, although they do receive their ultimate come-uppance. In 1898 Busch moved to Mechtshausen with his sister Fanny where he died on 9 January 1908.

Frog Morris and Nicole Mollett took us on a very different tour. *The Lanternist's Progress* was – very loosely – based on John Bunyan's

Pilgrim's Progress with adapted allegorical landmarks. Our hero, the Lanternist, went in search of a truly darkened room for his show. This took him to the local pub and into the city, meeting characters such as the worldly wise man and across exotic landscapes including, of course, Slough.



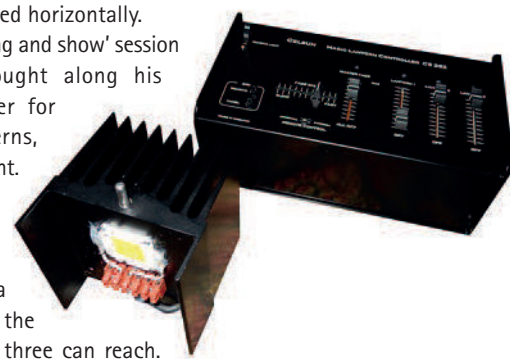
Somehow Adam and Eve and original sin came into the story with the front row offered apples. Eventually the Lanternist reached the very darkest place of all, courtesy of a magnificently scary satanic image – and (spoiler alert) ended up in a sausage machine.

This was a multi-projector show using two standard lanterns and a hand-held toy lantern to project a moving image of the travelling Lanternist. The images were a wonderful combination of original slides and Nicole's own highly original artwork.

After tea, Lester Smith followed up his session at the AGM when he projected the largest images ever made for the magic lantern by projecting a selection of some of the tiniest. Made for children, they came in many shapes and sizes with the smallest image 12mm high and the largest 110mm with nine sizes in between, all made for different toy lanterns. Around 80 per cent came from Germany. Subjects ranged from fairy tales to cycling pigs, from boating scenes to a horse and lion (after the famous George Stubbs painting). We saw grotesques and gurneying, a strange fish bowl and a crocodile at the window, as well as a long slide with a bull and vegetables, a horse race and, of course, a man swallowing rats. There were lighter moments for the young (original) audience, such as the discovery of the North Pole, carried horizontally.



In the final 'bring and show' session Robin Palmer brought along his prototype controller for up to three lanterns, including reading light. The dimmers allow each lantern to fade from 100 per cent to 0 per cent with a master fader setting the maximum level the three can reach.



Aileen Butler shared her experience of giving a show and running two workshops – one on the history of magic lanterns and the other on children's stories – at Wilton Music Hall in London.

A full programme, masterfully compered by our new Chair, Jeremy Brooker, then came to a close on time.

THE MAGIC LANTERN is edited, designed and produced by Mary Ann Auckland, Gwen Sebus and Dennis Crompton assisted by Annie Bridges.

Letters to the Editors can be sent by e-mail to: magiclantern@magiclantern.org.uk

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