

AUTUMN MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

SWEDENBORG SOCIETY, LONDON

SATURDAY 21 OCTOBER 2017

Mary Ann Auckland

For the autumn meeting, the Magic Lantern Society was back at the Swedenborg Hall in London, where around sixty members enjoyed a varied programme from presenters of all ages.

We began with **Philip Whitbourn's** presentation based on the Riley Brothers' set of *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. Riley Brothers flourished in Bradford between the late 1880s and around 1910. They claimed in one advert to be the 'largest and best magic lantern outfitters' and to have the largest collection of lantern slides for loan. Run by ardent Methodists, they offered a number of religious sets as well as entertainment (all at a discount to missions) – *Pilgrim's Progress* bridging the two. The set comprised sixty slides with a reading by the Rev. Dr Lamar and main illustrator Nancy Hammond Preston, a third-generation artist born in 1873 in Saltaire. As the set was produced in 1895, Nancy was only 22 at the time.

Pilgrim's Progress has never been out of print since first published in 1678 and was an illustrated text from the outset. Fortunately Philip spared us Dr Lamar's reading and selected highlights from the slide set. In the form of a dream – the book frontispiece shows Bunyan sleeping – Christian journeys from this world (the City of Destruction) to the next (the Celestial City). Setting out with Bible in hand and a burden of sin on his back, Christian encounters various self-explanatory characters and landmarks en route – such as Evangelist, Hypocrisis, Formalist, Ignorance, Hopeful, Hill Difficulty, Valley of Humiliation, Slough of Despond, River of Death – until reaching his destination (which bore some resemblance to Norwich) where he hands in his precious roll and stands on clouds.

Bringing us right up to date, **Anastasia Kerameos**, assisted by **Richard Crangle**, showed us around the new MLS website. Due to be launched in the next few months, this vital online presence aims to show people who we are and what we offer in order to encourage them to become members and provide value to existing members. While much of the existing content will remain, the design and navigation are being updated, building on research into browsing habits and preferences – such as the dominant reading pattern people follow (like an 'F', going across the top then down the left-hand side) – and the need for short, simple content. Visitors will be able to view the site equally well via PC, laptop, tablet or smartphone. Members welcomed the addition of digitised issues of *The Magic Lantern* and its predecessor *The New Magic Lantern Journal*. One suggestion from the floor was that we ensure people unfamiliar with the term 'magic lantern' (for example, searching for 'old projector') land on the site, and that we should include a set of changing slides as well as some video.

Lester Smith then introduced us to conman Ally Sloper – a Victorian superstar – and his curious family. The 'welcome' slide set the tone with Ally clearly hungover in the basket of a hot-air balloon, bottle in hand, and red nose prominent. His name derived

from his habit of sloping off down the alley when the rent man called. Mrs Sloper was a substantial matronly figure, daughter Tootsie a surprisingly glamorous showgirl who comments on the family adventures, son Alexander a younger mischievous version of his father and the dog (called 'Scruffy' by Lester). Ally Sloper was probably the first-ever comic strip character, appearing in *Judy* magazine (a rival to *Punch*) in August 1867. In 1884 Ally Sloper moved to his own paper – *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (by then most workers had Saturday afternoons off). This ran until 1916 with a brief revival of eighteen editions in 1922.

Lester showed us a mix of magazine pages and magic lantern slides (drawn by William Fletcher Thomas, painted and produced by Alfred Underhill) featuring a cricket match (Sloper's 11 vs Australia), the Prince and Princess of Wales (the Anglo-Daneries), Ally as county councillor (beer and gin better than pure well water), the family at Deal and Scarborough, foxhunting, ice skating and snowballing, selling ice cream, in a Roman style portrait, and at home in Sloper Court.

After lunch **Nicole Mollett** and **Frog Morris** took us on a magic lantern adventure down the Thames in their own inimitable style. The story centred on a little girl, Maija – with eighteen brothers and sisters – who was mudlarking on the banks of the Thames one day when she found some jewels. A very scary pirate (with Robert Newton overtones) attempted to take them away from her but she is saved by a man with a magic lantern who bears a remarkable resemblance to Christian from *Pilgrim's Progress* with a lantern added to his burden of sins. The lanternist takes Maija and the audience on a cruise down the Thames to the lost island run by elephants. En route we passed Brunel's Tunnel at Rotherhithe (great place for a magic lantern show), Hades (Central Line in the rush hour) and the Isle of Dogs



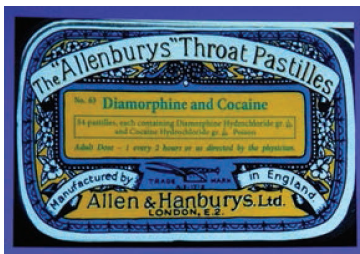
(you've guessed it). We saw the charms of Bexley, the eelmen of Erith and serpents in the sea, and then reached Gravesend, the last opportunity for turning back. Paying with the gems for a good shipping forecast from the seawitch, they found the island along with various magic animals and strange creatures under the sea. On returning the pirate was dispatched and all ended happily for Maija – and her eighteen brothers and sisters.

Frog and Nicole projected images around the room and produced multiple images of gems and shells with help from possibly our youngest-ever lanternist – Frog’s daughter Maija-Lisa, aged 4 – who already has her own lantern.

Kevin Varty gave us a snapshot of Victorian lifestyles through contemporary adverts.



The widespread sale and use of cocaine was a recurring theme – to cure dandruff, neuralgia, hay fever, toothache and lack of hair among other complaints. Indeed the original Coca Cola recipe (with cocaine) was recommended as an ideal brain tonic. Arsenic (until the Arsenic Act 1851) and morphine, even diamorphine, appeared in many products. Vaporising is nothing new although corsets for the ideal hourglass figure are, thankfully, more a thing of the past. Kevin showed adverts for corsets that were rustproof (non-whalebone variety), corsets for



children and a battery-driven electric corset. There was also an electropathic belt for men's 'weak and languid feelings'. Among the more appealing products was an obesity soap to wash away unsightly fat, a horse-action saddle (although you had to do all the work yourself) and a Niagara wave and rocking bath. We saw adverts for many other weird and wonderful products such as the cyclist's friend (a pistol), electric hair brush, toilet mask, artificial teeth, a revolving hammock and asthma cigarettes.



During the Bring & Show section Lester projected an early slide of Nelson and gave us a sea battle to mark Trafalgar Day. Then Nick Hiley completed the programme with a fascinating look at

the role of policemen in magic lantern slides. After a suitable lead-in featuring advice on introducing a joke (if it misfires, fire another shot quickly), Britannia and a Silence/Order Please slide, we saw *The Posting of a Letter* by George Washington Wilson in which a bobby on the beat helps a small girl to post a letter by lifting her up – rather questionable by today's standards. Policemen were not always shown in a favourable light. A typical example was *Bobby's Flirtation* where the maid looking after the baby is reading a novel in a park only to be chatted up by the bobby. Both go off leaving the son and heir unguarded, whereupon a passing tramp takes advantage and drinks the baby's milk! The returning bobby takes on the tramp and strikes a triumphant pose for the final slide.

The 1829 Metropolitan Police Act (under Sir Robert Peel) stipulated policing by consent – hence the blue uniform rather than military red. In magic lantern sets police are very seldom called in for emergencies – the Victorians preferring to rely on prayer and a higher authority – but are found patrolling, especially at night. They keep the peace and arrest drunks, as in *Bart's Joy* (York & Son). In *The Two Golden Lilies* (Bamforth & Co, 1893) a little girl is lost but still no police are called in. Next we saw *The Vulgar Little Boy* (1888) based on *Misadventures in Margate* from *The Ingoldsby Legends* (Thomas Ingoldsby, 1840). This relates Mr Simpkinson's encounter with an apparently suicidal boy on the pier who's 'got no supper, no Ma' and his father is 'on the seas'. Having taken the boy to his lodgings and gone out for some provisions, Mr Simpkinson returns to find no boy, no silver spoons, no hat, watch, coat, carpet bag, etc. Help from the town crier, mayor and eventually the police yields no result and a sailor suggests the boy has sailed away with his ill-gotten gains.

The final section comprised examples of the police coming off worst and concluded with the Bamforth & Co set *The Boy and the Policeman*. This featured Johnny throwing snowballs at the local bobby with the subsequent chase finishing up a tree from which the boy easily descends but the policeman crashes down. After that members packed up and dispersed, not necessarily heeding Nick's final slide that asked us to 'Please pass out quietly.'



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

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