

THE HURDY-GURDY AND THE MAGIC LANTERN

Bill Barnes

Those who are familiar with engravings and figure-ornaments of the 18th and 19th centuries depicting itinerant magic lantern showmen will be struck by how often the magic lantern is accompanied by a companion with a hurdy-gurdy. In fact so often is this the case that the two have become synonymous, like salt and pepper or fish and chips.

Porcelain figures either represent the lanternist and the hurdy-gurdy player (usually female) as a single ornament (Fig. 1) or equally as a pair of separate figures (male and female) (Fig. 2). However in paintings and engravings, naturally, they always appear together in the same picture (Fig. 3).



1. (Barnes Archive)



2. (Formerly in Barnes Archive)



3. (Lester Smith Collection)

Historically the hurdy-gurdy is a far more ancient instrument than the magic lantern, reaching back, as some experts would have it, to the 12th or 13th centuries and likely to have originated from further east.¹ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* places the origins in France during the 13th and 14th centuries, then known as the symphonia or chyfonie and in Germany as the lira or leyer.

The magic lantern, of course, first appeared in the 17th century in northern Europe. An inventor's name cannot be given definitely to either instrument, or an exact

date of invention for that matter. By contrast a kindred instrument, the concertina, we know was invented by Charles Wheatstone (inventor of the stereoscope) in 1829.

The hurdy-gurdy in medieval times (Fig. 4) was a far more complex instrument than that in the 17th and 18th centuries. Then it was probably played with a bow,³ this being replaced by a wooden resined wheel activated by a handle turned with the right hand. The keyboard too was modified and instead of the strings being plucked by quills as in a kind of harpsicord, they were set in vibration by small wheels. These simplifications dispensed with the need for two players



4. One of the earliest depictions of a hurdy-gurdy on the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Spain²

and enabled the instrument to be played when carried, being hung at a slant on a shoulder strap or played on one's legs while sitting so the keys fell back to their neutral position under their own weight. A couple of keys were suppressed so the basic sound was that of the drone of a bagpipe while the other keys supplied the melody played with the left hand.

Of course the hurdy-gurdy was not only used to accompany the magic lantern, it was a popular instrument in its own right, appearing at village festivities and providing

music for country dances as fiddle music is used for folk dancing, much in evidence today in Ireland and the American west. Along with bagpipes, the hurdy-gurdy must be one of humanity's oldest instruments and remained popular in parts of Europe, especially in the Auvergne in southern France and in Spain (Fig. 5), until World War II.

At one time, especially in Victorian London, it was a common sight until replaced by the more sophisticated and melodious barrel organ which needed no skill to play other than to turn a handle, thus it was



5. (a) Barnes Archive (b) Barnes Archive (above left and right)



6. An 18th-century hurdy-gurdy (Society of Friends of Music, Vienna, courtesy of Karl Geiringer) (right)



often confused with the other instrument. Today the hurdy-gurdy has become somewhat of a rarity, with examples only to be seen in museums or musical instrument collections. A fine example of an 18th-century hurdy-gurdy may be seen in Vienna, Austria, in the collections of the Society of Friends of Music (Fig. 6) or in the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, London, which has three 18th-century examples, with one on loan to the Horniman Museum, London.

Other instruments sometimes associated with travelling showmen are the fife and drum, and the tambourine, also ancient instruments, the drum being as old as humanity itself. This was used mainly to 'drum up an audience' while all three were handy if needed for a special effect.

It is somewhat surprising with the number of talented members in the Magic Lantern Society that none has attempted to feature a hurdy-gurdy in one of their shows – after all it was an integral part of any travelling lanternist's equipment. Specimens have turned up at auction and on eBay from time to time. On that note, I ring down the curtain!

(References and notes on opposite page)

A PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERN WEBSITE

Gwen Sebus and Michael van de Leur

People often ask whether I know who made the Luikerwaal.com website, or whether I have the webmaster's e-mail address. If they ask me to give a magic lantern show, they often say "We have already seen the slides on the Luikerwaal site". My own interest was triggered by the statement on the site that it belongs to the (digital) cultural heritage of the Netherlands. It really was time to pay a visit to the Luikerwaal webmaster, Henc de Roo, who received me at his home in Huizen in the Netherlands. Here is his story.

As a boy, Henc was already giving shows with a small projector. He had bought his first magic lantern made by Johann Falk, at a flea market for what is now approximately £4 (or 5 euro).



2. A very odd 'modern' projector

At that time little magic lanterns like these were usually thrown away if they were not sold. Henc developed an interest – more lanterns and slides followed. His motto became: "Ik verzamel niet om te hebben maar om te bewaren" ("I do not collect in order to possess, but in order to protect"). Not all the lanterns and slides on the website are owned by Henc. Some are owned by friends. One of his favourite lanterns is Henc's own – a lantern made from a biscuit tin.

Henc's training and technical experience with the Nederlandse Omroep Stichting (the Dutch counterpart of the BBC) – from which he has now retired – gave him an advantage over most people in handling computers. As a consequence, Henc was one of the first to own a home PC which he began to use for creating a database of his collection. Then came the idea of making the database available to the public through a website, which he started in 1997 under the name 'Luikerwaal'. The name was derived from the show people originating from the area of Luik (Liège) in Wallonia, Belgium, travelling around with their magic lanterns and slides on their back.



3. The 'biscuit tin' lantern



5. Henc with his home-made light box for photographing the slides

Henc developed the website at first only in Dutch, but later decided to add English to make the website more accessible. He had not expected that the site would grow so much both in size and in renown. His website distinguishes itself from other magic lantern sites in its scope: postcards and trading cards showing magic lanterns, books, catalogues, self-made stories, magic lanterns and of course many lantern slides. Henc's wish is to create a virtual magic lantern museum and he especially enjoys the juxtaposition

between the antiquated techniques of the magic lantern and the modern techniques of television and computers. Every day he works on his website, sometimes the whole day, and tries to upload something new. He receives feedback from all over the world, from as far as Japan. Henc distributes a monthly newsletter with news and additions to the website.

Since the Royal Library (the Dutch National Library) stated in 2014 that the website would be recorded as part of the Dutch cultural heritage, the website's contents are uploaded every six months to the national digital archives. This ensures that there is always a recent copy in the archives, should Henc suffer a disastrous computer crash. Another landmark that made Henc very proud is that *Collector's Weekly* pronounced the Luikerwaal site to be the best collector's website.

Hopefully, Henc will remain among us for many years to come so everybody can enjoy the Luikerwaal website!



1. Henc de Roo in front of one of his magic lantern cupboards

NOTES (from page 12)

1. Karl Geiringer, *Musical Instruments. Their History from the Stone-Age to the Present Day* (trans. Bernard Niall), 2nd Edition, Allen & Unwin, London, 1945. Percy Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 10th Edition (revised), OUP, 1995. *The Oxford Companion to Music*, revised edition, OUP, 1997
2. I have to thank Lester Smith for this illustration of one of the earliest depictions of a hurdy-gurdy (a type known as an organistrum) from the 12th century Portico de la Gloria on the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain.
3. The players in Fig. 4 seem to contradict some historians who believe it was at this time used with a bow. However a bas relief found in the ruins of the abbey of St George at Boscherville in Normandy, dating back to the 11th century and now preserved in the Museum of Rouen, possibly shows the two types – one played with a bow and the other played by two people with a handle [ed.].



6. Henc's motto