

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE 'OLD POLY'

Lester Smith

The Royal Polytechnic Institution in Regent Street finally closed its doors in 1882. In 1909 the 'Lantern Rays' column in the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* featured a series of interviews with people connected with the Polytechnic – or claiming to be – some 27 years after it closed. The column is signed 'Condenser' and was written by the editor, Theodore Brown. The *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* started out as the *Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* in 1904, a year after the demise of the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, and went weekly under its new title in 1907. It was published by E.T. Heron and, following many mergers and name changes, eventually became *Screen International*. These are extracts from the 1909 'Lantern Rays' column.

1 April 1909

There were three acting managers discussing – the weather, at a rendezvous not far from Charing Cross. "So far as touring the provincial Assembly Rooms is concerned," said one, "things are not too rosy; whether it is the bad times or whether the public have had too much bioscope I cannot say, but the box office looks pretty sick with most of the travelling picture combinations."

"Well," said A.M. No.2, "the wonder to me is it has lasted so long as it has, with these permanent shows opening up everywhere. There is one point, however, we have 'em on." "And that is?" I asked. "Why the illustrated songs; given a fair vocalist and good slides, the bioscope takes a back seat."

... And then some thoughts arise; in my mind's eye I again was in the 'large theatre' of the old 'Polytechnic Institution'. The hall was darkened, the lantern threw an act drop on to the white proscenium curtain. Mr Buckland, the lecturer, commenced to read the 'Book'. Anon the curtain rolled up, scene after scene was 'dissolved' and projected, wonderful effects were shown, eccentric dancing, duels, moving processions, etc., all depicted by the old time 'three-decker' or 'oxyhydro optical lantern'. Burlesques and pantomimes are not the only fare. Tours in the Highlands and through America, Wonders of the Microscope (with living insects, etc.), the 'Transit of Venus', and a hundred other amusing, instructive and scientific subjects.

If, thought I, the modern audience so much appreciates songs with slide illustrations, why not devote a little thought to reviving and surpassing the glories of the old 'Poly' lantern; let not the kinematograph monopolise the entire field of modern effort and inventive genius. Give some thought to the more valuable if less exploited 'lecture lantern'.



Detail of a slide from the Polytechnic set of Aladdin

With the object of discovering what progress is now obtaining in this direction I made my way to the well-appointed establishment of Mr York in Lancaster Road, Notting Hill, W., by whom I was most courteously received. On explaining the object of my visit Mr York became politely communicative.

"Yes," he said, "I remember the wonders of the old Polytechnic lantern lectures and playlets very well, but to revive them would mean a very considerable outlay. The lanterns in use there were most exceptional machines, practically built with the structure and having huge condensers, and indeed being altogether too large to be portable. Then, again, no expense was spared in the preparation of the pictures (they were really too large to be called 'slides' in our acceptance of the term); some were painted by Royal Academicians, some by popular designers of the period, others by leading humorous artists on the then popular comic journals; in price one picture would cost the management as much or more than we now charge for an entire set."

"We have now in stock slides illustrating the story of 'How Jane Conquest rang the Bell' by the late Dr Croft, who was for years the hon. director of this department of the Institution in Regent Street. He was an enthusiast, and assisted by Professor Pepper and other master minds, certainly introduced effects which were then unique and have never been equalled since in public lantern lectures. With him it was no question of remuneration, merely a desire to discover the limits of possible perfection, and yet the kinematograph escaped him!"

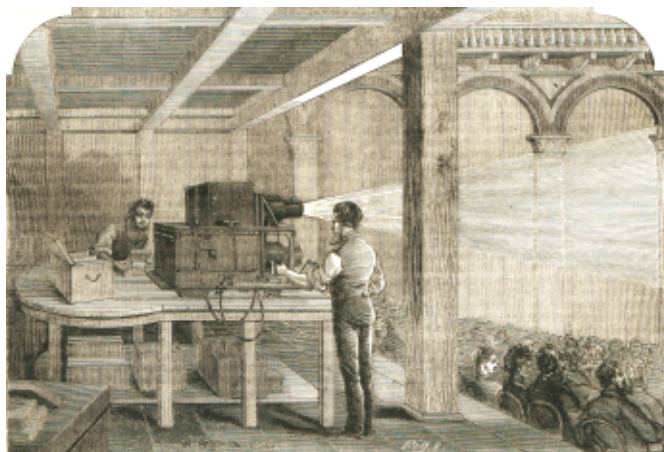
"A Mr King was associated with the scientific side of the Polytechnic; he is also dead, but I believe was succeeded by the late Mr Hepworth, whose son is so active and successful in the kinematograph world. Some of the original pictures are, I think, at the Aquarium, Yarmouth; at least they were a few years since, but would need specially constructed apparatus to project them successfully."

[Mr York (William, son of founder Frederick, of York & Son Ltd) goes on to say "I have a steadily increasing demand for slides, especially those of an educational interest ... we have a stock of over 50,000 different slides".]

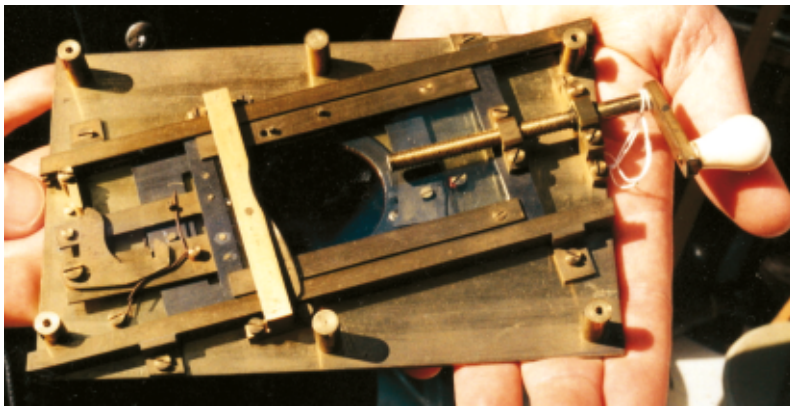
3 June 1909

It was at Hackney Wick I found him, not very far from Victoria Park Station, occupying a small flat with a bay window on a level with the dwarf front wall which enclosed a tiny garden giving evidences of careful attention. My victim for this interview was a venerable looking gentleman, with the traditional white beard and a jolly 'Father Christmas' head whose eyes still twinkled merrily when giving me his reminiscences and ideas.

"Recollect the old Poly., sir?" he asked, when I had taken a seat in his exceedingly neat parlour, "should think I do ... I was connected with



A projection area at the Polytechnic, from a contemporary engraving



The complex slide mechanism used at the Polytechnic to show the Transit of Venus

the Regent Street establishment for years, and used myself to assist in the operating chambers both upstairs and downstairs. They used to give the lectures and 'tours' mostly upstairs; it was in the large theatre downstairs where the entertainments of a more elaborate nature were put on."

"To revive and improve upon the lantern effects then given would need more than mere capital and enterprise – it would require brain and zeal. You could never credit the experiments, the careful calculations and deliberate consideration which at that time were given to the smallest detail of each new production. It took years to get the staff together – we had the best men in every department. Brunton, who used to draw for *Fun* (then the penny comic, edited by Tom Hood, jun.), did lots of our funny slides; they were not only amusing, they were also splendid examples of colouring and designing. I have known him change a slide twice after the first night, to satisfy himself – without any extra fee, mind you. I have seen half-a-dozen slides condemned in a day for trifling imperfections no ordinary spectator would notice."

"Professor Pepper and Mr Buckland, Dr Croft and Mr Privette were all very enthusiastic and extremely observant gentlemen. The gas used then was chemically superior to that in general use now; it was not prepared by the same method. Of course, electric arc lamps were not then in vogue, but with the oxy-hydro light in such lanterns and worked on the strictly scientific system then obtaining, I don't think even to-day you could 'flood' so large a screen better than we did."

"Our limes were supplied by a man in Turnpike Lane, Hornsey. I believe he afterwards turned photographer and went to Manchester – I think his name was Robinson. Whether he obtained his supply from the South Downs or Ireland I don't know, but they were excellent limes, specially made and 'cored' for our work. It is a strange thing, but a good many connected with the old Polytechnic took to photography when the place closed."

"Oh, effects! Well, we were always inventing new ones. The 'drop of water' was simple. A thick lead frame with glass let in and an air-tight lid formed the slide, space for water between the glasses like a model of the aquaria swimmers perform in on the halls. Just before projection a little pond water was poured in; the result was wonderful. Magnified thousands of times, the invisible creatures in the foul water were revealed all alive on the screen, and such monsters! There were some which looked like 'sea horses' with demons' heads. We used to get the water from the ponds across London; there were some on Wanstead Flats where I often obtained splendid specimens."

"It was a good idea we had to give a cascade effect. We used a bottle of water at the side of one of the lanterns and made a tiny hole through the cork; this sent a very fine jet of water across the condenser, and this being synchronised with the photograph of a waterfall, gave the appearance of falling water with absolute realism."

"The most wonderful effect I remember was in a popular lecture on astronomy. In this the Transit of Venus in front of the Sun was projected

with perfect fidelity. The mechanism required to secure this result was so exact and minute that it was several months before the slides could be perfected. It did not cause much sensation with the audiences, but to the expert it was a magnificent creation."

"The present day slide strikes me as being very imperfect in conception and carelessly finished. All our dramatic slides were specially drawn and coloured by good artists. To-day episodes in songs, etc., are illustrated by hastily taken photographs rendered in impossible tints (no man wears sky blue trowsers and orange coloured shirts). Then the postures of the models; I could name one photographic slide provider who utilises members of his own family for all his studies. They assume the most grotesque expressions and poses imaginable. It is the difference between the drawing of a trained painter from life models and a rough process-block obtained from a group of amateur actors. There is nothing in recent slides to 'grip' the observer."

June 10, 1909

With reference to my visit to Hackney Wick (reported last week) a valued correspondent has sent in the somewhat critical review which follows. Before journeying to Victoria Park, I fully satisfied myself that I was to visit an ex-employee of the 'Old Poly'. I can only conclude that he has reached that venerable age when absolute adhesion to chronology becomes a matter of difficulty and things get 'somewhat mixed' at times.

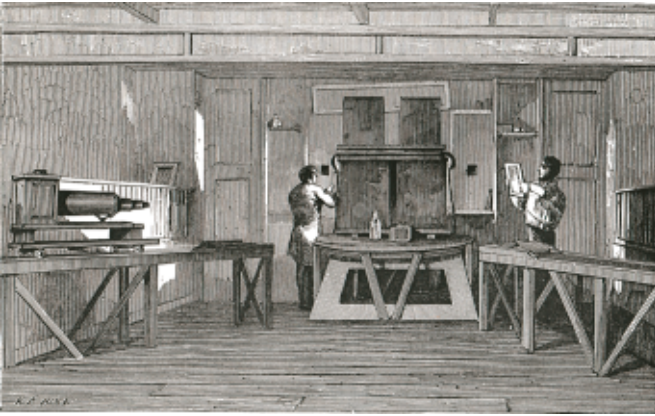
A correspondent sends us the following seven paragraphs which we insert under this column as the matter in question was dealt with under this heading in our issue for June 3rd.

"I note the interview which you published in the last issue with one who was connected with 'The Old Poly of Regent Street' in the olden days when it was the home of the lantern. For the benefit of future generations who may have occasion to refer to your columns from a historical point of view, it is as well to correct one particular statement. In the fifth paragraph the gentleman who is likened to Father Christmas and who resides at Hackney Wick, makes the following definite assertion: 'Our limes were supplied by a man in Turnpike Lane, Hornsey – I think his name was Robinson.'"

"In the olden days spoken of, Turnpike Lane, Hornsey, was a mere country lane at the end of which (in the Green Lanes) stood a toll gate. Hedges lined the sides of this lane and there were hay fields adjacent. Some years after the old Poly ceased to be, this lane became built upon and at the back of an oil shop a stable was erected. It was this stable-building which was occupied for some months only during 1899 as a



Slide image from the Polytechnic set of The Lady of the Lake



The interior of the optical box at the Polytechnic, looking towards the screen. The assistants are supposed to be showing the dissolving views

lime turning factory by a Mr Robinson before which time no limes were ever made in the vicinity. If this was many years after the passing of the Poly it is quite evident that the limes used in connection with that situation were not obtained either from the place stated nor the person named. As a matter of fact, the old Poly had been closed seventeen years before this gentleman made any limes."

"Perhaps the 'subject of the interview' never heard of the Messrs Darker who were the noted and practically sole providers of limes of the period alluded to. Their place of business was at Lambeth. Everyone at the Poly knew 'Charlie Darker'."

"It is a little disappointing that the 'interviewed' did not mention something about the wonderful lantern effects produced during the time he operated at the old Poly instead of telling us that old tale about the dirty water from the ponds about London. Even this he forgot to tell us was shown by means of a microscopic attachment to the lantern. Details respecting such sets of slides as the descent of the diving bell or

Baron Munchausen, etc., would have been of interest."

"Again, how very instructive it would have been to have heard something about the lanterns themselves which our friend assisted at, how at one time the lanterns were practically bodyless, the operating room acting so to speak for the bodies of nine projecting lanterns. That the condensers were nine inches in diameter, with a collecting lens of about half this diameter placed between the condenser proper and the illuminant. Then we might have been told something about the projection objectives which were twelve inches in focus and six inches in diameter. Also details of the clockwork used for turning the limes and how the one inch piping was laid from the operating chamber to the oxygen and hydrogen tanks underneath and how the tanks were balanced and made on the principle of the gasometer and the manner in which the gases were generated by those who operated."

"I can only suppose that the 'interviewed', whose name does not transpire, must have forgotten about these interesting items as he must by this time be getting well on in years."

"Lastly, it was a well known fact that as soon as the old Poly closed its doors in 1882 and there was thus no authority to contradict their statements, almost every lantern operator of that time described himself as 'late of the Royal Polytechnic, London', and many of them told this tale so often that they actually came to believe it themselves although as a matter of fact they had had no connection whatever with the place. Eventually there were so many lantern operators about who thus described themselves that it became quite ridiculous; one would have thought that the Poly had dozens of lanterns going and that a new set of operators were engaged at least once a month. At last this sort of appellation became so absurd that it died a natural death, especially when it became known that a list of all those engaged by the Poly is in existence which gives the capacity in which they were engaged."

CONDENSER