

The Magic Lantern

THE EXETER THEATRE FIRE OF 1887

Richard Crangle and Martin Gilbert

On Monday 5 September 1887 at the Theatre Royal, Exeter, an audience of around 800 people (the theatre could seat around 1,500 when full) were enjoying a performance of George R. Sims' popular melodrama *The Romany Rye* when, it is believed, scenery backstage caught fire from a naked gas flame. The interior of the theatre was completely destroyed within an hour. As a result of the fire and the ensuing panic at least 186 people died at the scene or from their injuries in the days that followed. There were very few escape routes in the theatre, especially for those



Exterior of theatre from architect's drawing (The Graphic, 10 September 1887)

in the cheaper seats. Theatregoers in the stalls mostly survived but the fatality rate was high among those in the gallery. The Exeter fire resulted in the worst loss of life ever recorded in a British theatre fire and led to new legal requirements for fire safety including emergency exits, the fireproof safety curtain and – the lanternist's favourite – illuminated exit signs. The Theatre Royal had been built in 1886 to replace an earlier theatre at a different site that was also destroyed by fire but without loss of life, apart from a pig (allegedly). The new theatre was at the junction of Longbrook Street, New North Road and London Inn Square, just outside the historic city centre. After the fire the Theatre Royal was rebuilt on the same site and continued as Exeter's main theatre until it closed in 1962. Then it was demolished to make way for a modern office block, ironically including the offices of the insurance company that had insured the lives of many of the 1887 audience. That building has now been converted into student accommodation.



Slide No. 1 – Exterior of Theatre by night

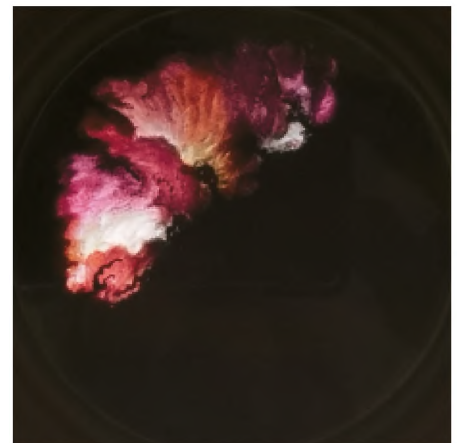


Slide No. 2 – Interior of Theatre

The 1887 fire was widely covered in the national press, including weeklies such as *The Graphic*, the *Illustrated London News* and the *Illustrated Police News*, and as one of William 'The Great' McGonagall's epic poems. A human interest disaster such as a theatre fire resonates into popular culture and being a visually spectacular – though horrific – event it also lent itself to treatment in lantern slides. Fire, volcanic eruptions and other phenomena were the staple ingredients of dissolving views and astonishing effects. Pat and Ray Gilbert's *Exeter Theatre Fire* set illustrated here and shown by Martin at the MLS Summer Meeting in Exeter (see p. 15) was once in the collection of Mike Simkin (see p. 8).



Slide No. 3 – Smoke issuing from auditorium



Slide No. 4 – Rack with fire

The set of seven slides was made by W.C. Hughes of London, most likely within a year or two of the event and certainly before 1893. By coincidence, this very set is referred to as an example in one of the standard textbooks on how to use a lantern – *The Art of Projection and Complete Magic Lantern Manual* by 'An Expert' (a pseudonym of Charles (Continued on page 3)

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Slide No. 5 – Exterior in flames



Slide No. 6 – Rack fire for exterior



Slide No. 7 – The ruins



The interior and exterior, with effects, as they appeared in the show



careful that the handle is being turned the right way. To see the smoke descending instead of rising, at once makes an otherwise grand effect ludicrous. To guard against such a mistake, cut deeply an arrow on the edge of the frame, so that in the dark the direction of the arrow may be felt. Continue to turn the smoke, at the same time gradually pulling off the slip glass, uncovering more of the smoke. An assistant will be necessary to turn the smoke rack whilst the rack with the fire No. 4 is introduced into the third lantern, dissolve this on gently, turning the handle of the fire and gradually pull out the slip glass, which covers the fire, at the same time gently pushing back in its place the slip glass of the smoke rack, until the fire is on full and the

Bishop), published in London by E.A. Beckett, 1893. This type of manual, published by the lantern trade, was often associated with one of the major dealers to promote their products and this one is full of examples of Hughes slides and lantern hardware. On pages 50 and 51 the section on 'Effects' gives step-by-step instructions for showing the seven-slide set as demonstrated at the MLS Meeting. The text is reproduced below:

EFFECTS

Some Complicated Effects, and how they should be worked.

Exeter Theatre Fire. – (1) Exterior of Theatre by night, and lamps illuminated. (2) Interior. (3) Smoke issuing from auditorium, very finely at first, then increasing in volume until flames burst forth. (4) And the whole auditorium is in one rolling mass of smoke and flame. (5, 6 and 7) Exterior in flames, the fire burning out leaving only the ruins. To work this effectively a triple is required, as three lanterns are in use at one time.

Firstly, No. 1 exterior, then No. 2 and 3 are put on together, the rack slide No. 3 on which smoke is painted, has a slip glass blacked, and when in its normal position all but obliterates the smoke itself.

As 2 and 3 are dissolved on, gently turn the smoke rack, being

smoke is covered up, dissolve off this smoke rack and introduce the next picture (5).

No. 5. Exterior in flames, engines, firemen, etc. Dissolve off the interior and its fire rack, introducing No. 6 rack fire for exterior, gradually withdraw the slip glass until the flames cover the building to the full extent. After working the rack a few seconds, introduce the 'Ruins', dissolve on with care. At this period we have three lanterns going until we dissolve off No. 5. The rack fire and ruin slide are now showing, gently push back the cover glass of the rack which cuts off the flame, until it is back in its normal position, and lighten up the ruin view to its full extent, hold the open fingers in front of the lens of the lantern containing the rack; flicker the flames by opening and closing the fingers a few times, until you cover up the fire entirely, leaving the ruins alone on the screen. Note – All fire and smoke effects are improved by being slightly out of focus.

MLS members can watch the presentation by Richard Crangle and Martin Gilbert at the 2021 Summer Meeting by following the 'Past Events' link from the 'Events' section of the MLS website (www.magiclantern.org.uk).

Engravings of the fire from the Illustrated London News (left) and Illustrated Police News (right), both from 10 September 1887

