

OBITUARY

MIKE SIMKIN (1939-2021)

Mike was born in Ipswich in 1939. His father was a chemist in Stowmarket, Suffolk, who supplied the Royal Family at Sandringham. Mike went to school at Town Close in Norwich and Gresham's in Holt, Norfolk. After Gresham's he studied for his National Diploma in Design at Colchester School of Art (1956-59) followed by the Royal College of Art (RCA). While there Mike was awarded a scholarship which enabled him to spend some time in Staffordshire producing work which was very much admired. The team from the BBC's arts programme *Monitor* (1958-65) filmed some of the students at the RCA and Mike's work stood out, which resulted in him being signed up by *The Observer* newspaper as a reportage illustrator. Sadly the RCA wouldn't let him work while he studied and he gave up the opportunity in favour of completing his studies.



Mike as a student at Colchester School of Art

His love of storytelling and the moving image also included moveable illustration and following my retirement in 2004 we had great pleasure in interviewing more than 20 current illustrators for *Carousel*, a specialist magazine that focused on children's books.

After his stroke, when he was only 36, Mike used up his sick leave, then returned to work full time as a university lecturer and did not retire until 1998. Despite his physical difficulties he lived a rich and fulfilling life, raised the two boys and never complained – even in his last years when he was largely immobile. He is survived by myself, Dave, Andy and grandson George.

Theresa Simkin

I knew Mike before the Magic Lantern Society was founded in 1977. I know we put on a joint magic lantern show at the Kodak Museum in 1971 but I must have first met him in the late 1960s. Many years ago I remember giving him an 18th-century hand-painted French slide, part of a set I had just acquired. I bought a miscellaneous lot at the sale of Mike's collection in 2016 and found amongst it the same slide, in the same box in which I had delivered it – so the set is complete once again. My most common topic of conversation with Mike was about Albert Smith. I lent him my Albert Smith Panorama for his MLS 1985 *Ascent of Mont Blanc* show with his Knott lanterns. I also remember being involved in another show with Mike and Tre. In a letter Mike sent me in 1985, which I still have, he says he is sad how little we see of one another. He goes on to say he sees much more of David Robinson because of their involvement with the Panorama Society. However I did see Mike and Tre in Birmingham in more recent times.

David Francis

In 1976 I gave the 'vote of thanks' on behalf of the Solihull Education Authority at a public event we had sponsored. There had been a packed audience to watch the 'Mike and Elizabeth Simkin Magic Lantern Show', where they had performed with great skill on their complex triennial lantern. As they were packing away their beautiful slides I introduced myself to Mike and Liz and mentioned that I had been a longtime collector of vintage photographic items. In Mike's mind I was immediately enrolled as a potential member of the about-to-be-established 'Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain'. It was the start of a long and rewarding friendship. We spent many lunchtimes discussing topics of mutual interest. Mike gave me unlimited advice and information about the history of magic lantern performances and loaned me many of his books. When Rosie and I gave our first theatre shows Mike and Liz were there to give their support.

Philip Banham



Mike Simkin in 2013 at the wedding of his son Dave and daughter-in-law Rhea

His first teaching job was at Harrogate School of Art followed by a move around 1964 to Birmingham where he taught drawing, print and illustration. Mike's love affair with the magic lantern was very much part of his love of narrative and storytelling. His collection was formed as an aid to his teaching.

He married his first wife Elizabeth, always known as Liz, in 1962 and they adopted two boys – Dave and Andy. After Mike suffered a devastating stroke in 1976 Liz joined in presenting their famous lantern shows. Their annual Christmas Show at Birmingham Town Hall and the steam fair at the Science Museum are still spoken about today.

He enjoyed telling the story of how he bought Liz what he thought was a lantern for a present but it turned out to be a biscuit tin, and another tale about turning up at a church hall in a small country town to discover a pile of dog poo where he wanted to set up!

Liz died in 1993 and I met Mike two years later. We married in 1999 and I also found myself helping to present lantern shows. Sadly I couldn't lift the big triple lantern, which restricted our programme, but we continued presenting almost until Mike parted with the collection at the auction in July 2016.



Mike performing at the 2010 Flatpack Festival in Birmingham (photo taken by Jayne Wilson, one of Mike's ex-students)



Programme from the 1973 event described by Jeremy Brooker, featuring 'M. Simkin Esq - A Demonstration of the Noakes Triple Lantern' (Note the cost of lunch ... 50p!)

From Jeremy Brooker, Chair of the Magic Lantern Society

My earliest memories of Mike date back almost half a century to an icy Saturday afternoon in Birmingham in January 1973. I had made the journey north with my lanternist friends Beryl Vosburgh and Janet Tamblin to attend a special event organised by the Royal Photographic Society. In my memory the whole scene resembled a magic lantern slide, with everything blanketed in white and perhaps even a few flakes of falling snow. Mike later recalled the show nearly ending in catastrophe as he skidded into the building on treacherous ice. For me, it was a truly memorable event – the never-to-be forgotten thrill of seeing an expertly presented magic lantern show for the first time.

With the formation of the Magic Lantern Society in 1977 I was fortunate to get to know Mike better and was even able to visit his home when I was a student in Birmingham. He loved sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm, particularly about popular entertainments in his home city, and was a regular contributor to MLS publications and exhibitions. In recent years the Society has been able to acknowledge its debt to Mike in a small way, with an honorary membership for Mike and Tre and an interview in our TML series 'Prominent Magic Lanternists' (TML 8, September 2016). We were also able to present a brief tribute to Mike at our meeting in Exeter at the end of July, showing two short documentary films on Mike and his work, including his active involvement on the Bill Douglas feature film *Comrades* (1986).

It was Mike's greatest regret that his remarkable collection could not find a permanent home in Birmingham and was instead dispersed by auction in 2016; but with characteristic generosity he expressed the wish that these wonderful artefacts would continue to give "fulfilment and pleasure" to others as they had to him, and "provide cherished memories for their new owners in the years to come". Mike was a great champion of the magic lantern, and will be much missed by his many friends in the Magic Lantern Society.

As a dedicated collector of interesting things, 48 years ago I bought a collection of 30 slipping slides and two boxes of 'Primus' slides from an antique shop because they were so colourful and fascinating. I wondered what on earth they were for so I asked a few other antique shops if they knew and even a local auction house but always got the same answer – they were mostly used in churches. Then one day I saw an advertisement in the local paper for a magic lantern show, so Stephanie and I went along to see what it was all about. It was truly 'magic'! When it was over I plucked up courage to ask the lanternist, Mike Simkin, who was busy packing up his equipment, a stream of questions. After a quick chat he invited us to visit him at his home to show me a lot more of his collection. He also mentioned the possibility of the formation of a magic lantern society.

Mike Simkin was always keen to talk and share his information and knowledge. Being a teacher, he was in the habit of inviting students to view his collection which was beautifully laid out in an upstairs room – all neatly labelled

like in a museum. He was most keen on promoting Birmingham as an important centre for early photography, scientific toys and instruments and the magic lantern. In fact, at our 2001 Convention in Birmingham, one of our exhibition rooms was full of items originating from Birmingham, many loaned by Mike who took a close and vital interest in proceedings.

We will miss Mike, with all his knowledge and stories, very much.

Lester Smith



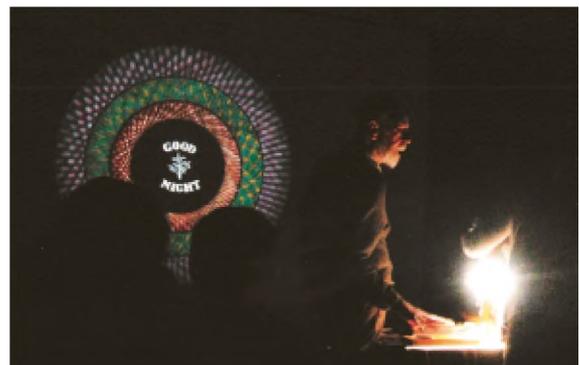
Mike's collection at the auction in July 2016



Mike with one of his first magic lanterns



Mike's Noakes triple lantern at the auction in 2016



Mike performing at the 2010 Flatpack Festival in Birmingham (again taken by Jayne Wilson, his ex-student)