

DISSOLVES AND DREAMS REUNITED

Martin Gilbert

A report on part of an MLS meeting should surely begin and end on the date when it took place – but I am going to start 12 years ago and the reason for this will become clear later. In 2010 I managed to purchase a substantial number of slides from an auction house in Leominster, close to the Welsh/English border. They were part of the collection of an MLS member who had lived locally and passed away in 2008.

There were hundreds of lots in the auction and I had to bid carefully to acquire what I believed were the important or appropriate lots. One problem was that many sets had been divided between two, three or even four lots and once I had secured the first lot I needed to obtain the others ... there were some anxious moments! I remember well bidding on one lot comprising 40 or 50 slides just to acquire one single slide that I knew belonged to a set I had already partly purchased. However in this case it was worth it because these slides became a staple ingredient of my 'Magical Moments' dissolving view shows over the years that many members will have seen and hopefully enjoyed (see, for example, *TML* 31, p. 15).

But there were many 'left-over' slides – effect slides missing their dissolving view partners, dissolves missing their effects, part sets, etc. These ended up left on the shelf gathering dust. All the slides were of superior quality and were mainly produced by J.H. Steward, W.C. Hughes and even some by E.H. Wilkie, a particular interest of mine (see *TML* 19, p. 15). Why so many sets were incomplete, even after the different lots had been recombined, was a complete mystery.

So back to summer 2022 and our meeting at Lacey Green. A wonderful time was had by all, with old and new friends enjoying the stalls, magnificent presentations and, of course, the traditional strawberries and cream. However, at times it is difficult for Lester Smith and myself to come up with full new programmes for each quarterly meeting (all offers welcome!) and, when initially we put together this one, we had some spare slots. As the summer meeting is always relatively relaxed we decided to try out our idea of attempting to bring back together dissolving view slides with their partners and effects, perhaps after many years apart. We do not take credit

for the idea as we believe there was a similar attempt 25 years ago or more at an MLS meeting in the Art Workers' Guild, London. But no doubt many MLS members have sets, sequences and single slides missing one or more vital partner that makes sense of it all, so we felt it was well worth repeating. As I have explained I had a significant number in my own collection too.

When we published the programme we were not sure what the reaction would be but I have to say that it was greeted with great interest. True to form, Peter Gillies, Lester Smith, Richard Feltham and Trevor Beattie brought along fantastic part-dissolves and mechanical effect slides, each contributor covering an entire table. All these oddments were very high quality and the four tables at the front of the hall, with light boxes, made a wonderful display of interesting slides, worthy of an MLS exhibition. The surprise was that the majority of them were extremely unusual, if not unique – I was anticipating more familiar watermill sequences and their variants which are much easier to match. Many of the slides did not fall into any obvious category. At breaks during the day attendees spent a good deal of time looking over the slides and made some very enthusiastic and perceptive remarks.

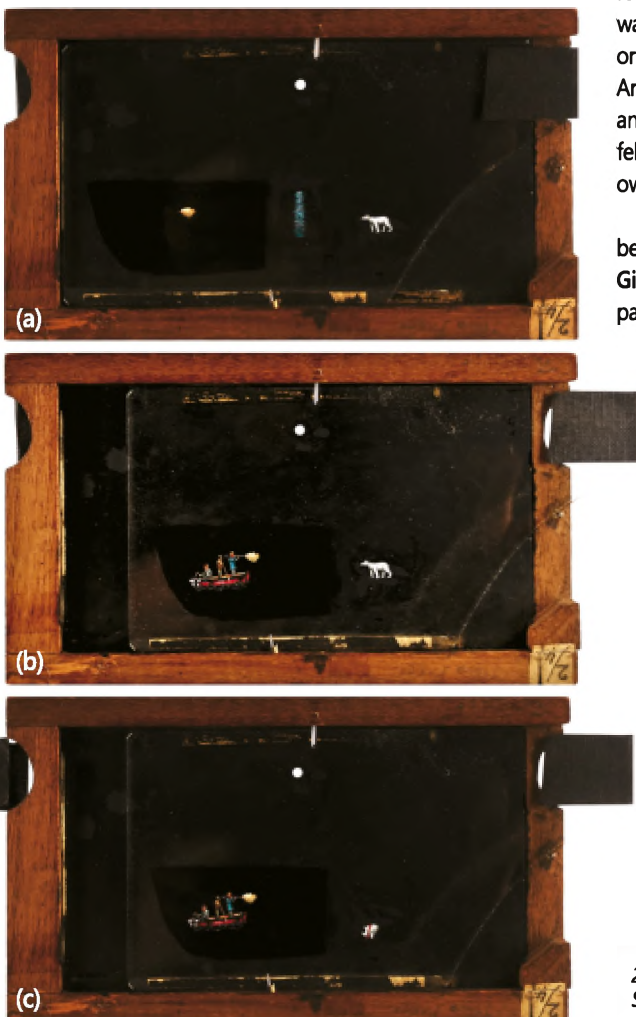
Although not projected at the meeting Trevor Beattie brought along one slide that particularly caught my attention. This was a winter scene by Newton & Co, very beautifully painted in typical Newton style. After many years of collecting, you can instantly recognise different slide manufacturers purely by their individual painting style. To name just a few, Carpenter & Wesley, W.C. Hughes, J.H. Steward, Newton & Co and Millikin & Lawley all had their own unique, distinctive painting style and quality



1(a). Martin Gilbert's 'Summer', Newton & Co. (photo: Trevor Beattie)

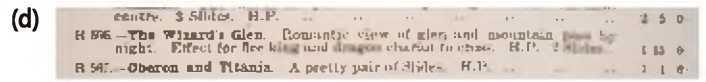


1(b). Trevor Beattie's 'Winter', Newton & Co. (photo: Trevor Beattie)

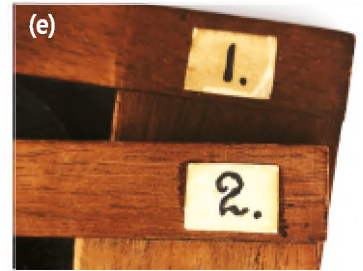


(d) *Hunting the Polar Bear, View in Arctic Sea with Icebergs.—Bear is seen on ice; Deck rows on; one of the sailors fires a gun; when the flash dies away the bear is discovered bleeding; another shot is fired and the bear falls dead 2 Slides 1 : 0*

2(a-c). Hunting the Polar Bear (Martin Gilbert collection). (d) Extract from J.H. Steward catalogue, 1874 (Lester Smith collection)



3. Oberon and Titania. (a) The maiden asleep (Peter and Delia Gillies collection). (b) The top of the two slides. (c) Slide from Martin Gilbert collection. (d) J.H. Steward catalogue, 1900 (Lester Smith collection). (e) Paper labels on the slides

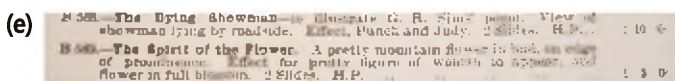


project and compare these slides, during my afternoon session reporting on discoveries they had a mixed reception due to the content. At the time we had no further information about them but Trevor's slide was marked 'Bear Hunt.' Since the meeting I have found the reference in J.H. Steward's catalogue of 1874 (Fig. 2d), with a very gruesome description: "Hunting the Polar Bear, View in Arctic Sea with icebergs - Bear is seen on ice; Boat rows on; one of the sailors fires a gun; when the flash dies away the bear is discovered bleeding; another shot is fired, and the bear falls dead. 2 Slides." Now Trevor and I are on our own bear hunt for two static slides by J.H. Steward entitled 'Hunting the Polar Bear' or 'View in Arctic Sea with Icebergs'. But could we ever use them in public? Probably not.

standards. I recognised this image immediately as part of, I believed, a three-slide dissolve in my collection. That very evening I found the slides. Yes, I had three slides - but my set was in fact a pair of slides, 'Summer' and 'Winter', plus the spare 'Summer' slide that Trevor was seeking. The second set has now been reunited and is living with Trevor in Hove. We had our first 'match' (Fig. 1).

I took along a handful of slides myself, including one which I thought was a unique bear shooting effect slide. This came from the Doug and Anita Lear Collection many years ago (Fig. 2). Amazingly, Trevor brought along the same slide but with an extra slipping glass for a more remarkable gunfire effect. While it was interesting to

Another slide I projected on the day belonged to Peter Gillies and was a beautifully painted image of a lady asleep, resting her head against a tree with a star laden sky above her (Fig. 3a). Peter knew this was part of a set and was on the search for the rest. There were no clues about the correct title on the slide as it simply said 'Fairy' written in ink in a distinctive style on the top of the mahogany frame - and that is what caught my attention (Fig. 3b). The writing seemed familiar from an odd slide in my collection. Yes, it was a complete match (Fig. 3c), not only for the dissolving images but also the handwritten ink titles and even the paper numbering labels (Fig. 3e). The two slides were clearly from the same lanternist's collection, mine being the effect slide for Peter's slide! I soon found the reference in the J.H. Steward catalogue of 1900: "Oberon and Titania. A pretty pair of slides. H.P." (Fig. 3d).



4. The Spirit of the Flower. (a) 'A pretty mountain flower in bud, on edge of prominence' (Martin Gilbert collection). (b) The top view of the two slides. (c) Side view of the two slides. (d) Effect for 'pretty figure of woman to appear, and flower in full blossom' (Peter and Delia Gillies collection). (e) J.H. Steward catalogue, 1885 (Lester Smith collection). (f) Paper number labels on the two slides

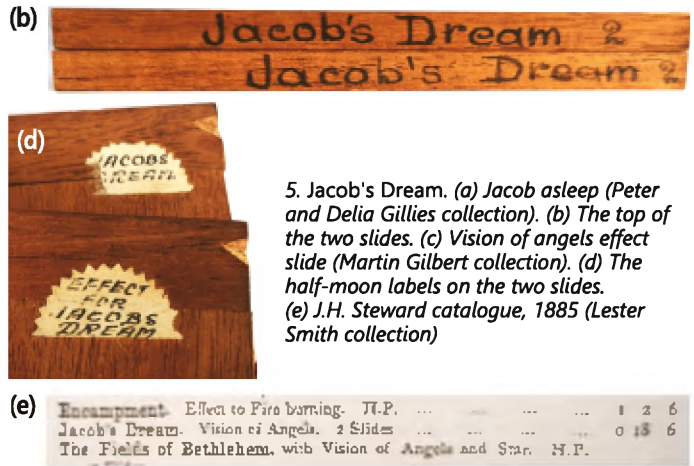


The other slide I projected from Peter's collection also had a handwritten ink title on the top (see Fig. 4). This was simply 'Flower' (Fig. 4b) but the full title *Spirit of the Flower* was handwritten on the side of the wooden frame (Fig. 4c). This time the first slide of the sequence was in my collection (Fig. 4a) and I had long wondered what magnificent effect would be linked to such a high-quality painted slide – I was not disappointed (Fig. 4d). The description in the J.H. Steward catalogue of 1900 reads: "*The Spirit of the Flower. A pretty mountain flower in bud, on edge of prominence. Effect for pretty figure of woman to appear, and flower in full blossom. 2 Slides. H.P.*" (Fig. 4e). Again the paper numbering labels matched too (Fig. 4f). The total match between my Leominster 'odds' and slides in the Gillies' collection was beginning to be more than a coincidence.

Both beautiful J.H. Steward sets (Figs 3 and 4) came from the section of the catalogue called 'New Dissolving View Effect Slides, Suitable for Two or More Lanterns'. Both are also marked 'H.P.' in the listing and the catalogue notes: "N.B. – When marked H.P. the slides are entirely hand drawn and painted. This secures, when executed by first-class artists, the most perfect transparent colours, and effective pictures." This explains their outstanding quality which is clearly visible with the naked eye.

The next slide was not projected at the meeting but displayed on the table for members to view. This was the main image for *Jacob's Dream* (Fig. 5a) belonging to Peter Gillies. Again the handwriting on the mahogany frame was distinctive (Fig. 5b). Incidentally the '2's indicate that there are two slides in the sequence, not that the slide is the second in the set – and this was typical of W.C. Hughes. My slide was a complete match (Fig. 5c), even with the distinctive half-moon paper labels (Fig. 5d). I have found a reference to a two-slide set in the Steward catalogue of 1885 (Fig. 5e) ("*Jacob's Dream. Vision of Angels. 2 slides*") but I feel this set is more likely to be W.C. Hughes because of the more generic effect slide.

The final sequence 'discovered' at Lacey Green is probably my favourite 'find' of the day. Peter and Delia Gillies had a pair of slides for sale on their market stall – Venice by day and by night (Fig. 6a and b). Peter kindly suggested an 'I want you to own these' price,



5. *Jacob's Dream*. (a) *Jacob asleep* (Peter and Delia Gillies collection). (b) The top of the two slides. (c) *Vision of angels effect slide* (Martin Gilbert collection). (d) The half-moon labels on the two slides. (e) J.H. Steward catalogue, 1885 (Lester Smith collection)

which I duly paid without hesitation. For 12 years I have cherished a panoramic slide of an illuminated procession moving across an Italian canal (Fig. 6c) but only imagined what the companions to this effect slide were – and now I know. Unfortunately I have not been able to identify the exact set in a Hughes catalogue (as yet) as only a limited number of W.C. Hughes catalogues are known to have survived. The closest match was in a 1901 W.C. Hughes catalogue: "*Grand Canal, Venice. 1, The Grand Canal by Day. 2, The Grand Canal by Night, with moving gondola and torchlight funeral procession on the way to Campa Santa. 3, Framed effect to produce moonrise and ripple*" (Fig. 6d). This description is almost correct, but our three-slide dissolve is day, night and a torchlit procession effect. However the catalogue description appears under the heading 'New Cheap Effects' within the 'Dissolving Views' section and our sequence is certainly a superior version. There is an accurate description of the set in the 1885 Steward catalogue (Fig. 6e) ("*Grand Canal, Venice, by Day, by Night, and moving Gondola, with Torchlight Funeral Procession on the way to Campo Santa. 3 Slides*") but our set is definitely by W.C. Hughes as we can see not only by the paper labels but also by the painting style that is noticeably different from the J.H. Steward slides previously illustrated.

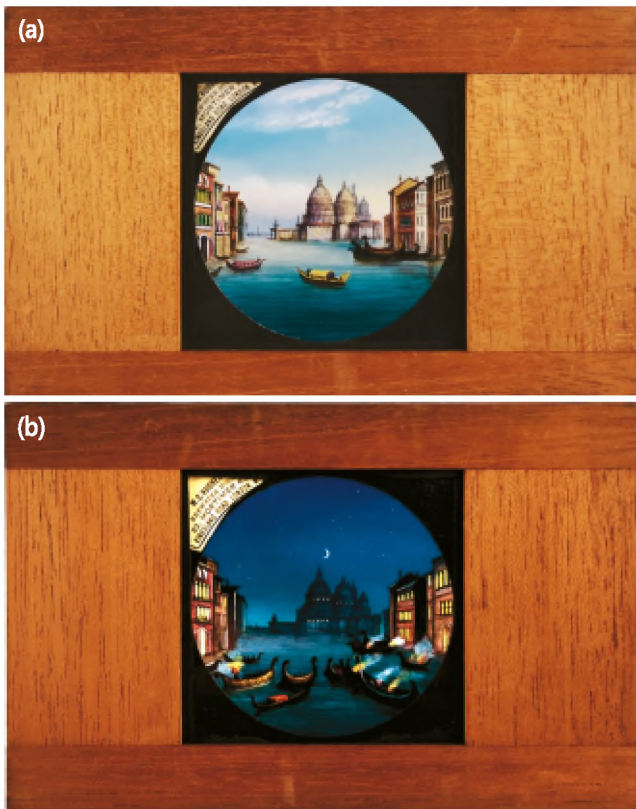
I have shown the moving panorama slide twice here, once with the moving element in place (Fig. 6c) and once with it removed showing just the silhouettes (Fig. 6d). This reveals one of the secrets of dissolving views. When this slide is projected upon the night-time view (Fig. 6b) the silhouettes exactly match the foreground objects (Fig. 6g) and this subtle effect will create the illusion of the torchlight procession passing gracefully behind the expectant stationary gondolas. A wonderful and truly magical effect ... if you have the lantern registered to within fractions of an inch!

As you will have spotted, the most remarkable revelation of the day was that Peter Gillies and I had clearly acquired two parts of the same collection quite independently and in different ways. This is Peter's story:

"My contact was made via a 'wanted' advertisement which I put out. The man who responded was rather vague but I do remember that I knew before leaving home that the slides were in wooden frames. In those days a journey resulting in disappointment was not unusual, but I set off with visions of the most wondrous desirable and quality slides waiting at my journey's end.

"I certainly drove west from East Sussex but how far? Definitely not as far as Wales but well on the way as the whole expedition took most of the day. The destination was a rural area with a long track up to the property. The seller was very hospitable and over a cup of coffee in a comfy chair he explained how he had a skip-hire business. Even without any knowledge or understanding of what they were, he rescued the slides purely on a magpie instinct as they were shiny, colourful and clean – so they must be worth money!

"I agreed and we swiftly came to a deal. I do remember that he didn't argue but just accepted my offer. The slides were obviously very much as my imagination had built them up to be – with W.C. Hughes stickers and



(e) GRAND CANAL, VENICE. 41 No. 6d.
 1 The Grand Canal by Day
 2 The Grand Canal by Night, with moving gondola and torchlight funeral procession on the way to Campo Santa. Pramed effect to produce sunrise and sunset

(f) Date ditto H.P.
 Grand Canal, Venice, by Day, by Night, and moving Gondola, with Torchlight Funeral Procession on the way to Campo Santa. 3 Slides 2 3

6. Grand Canal, Venice. (a) By day and (b) By night (Peter and Delia Gillies collection). (c) Panoramic slide with moving glass in place and (d) the same slide with the moving glass removed (Martin Gilbert collection). (e) W.C. Hughes catalogue, 1901, and (f) J.H. Steward catalogue, 1885 (Lester Smith collection). (g) Comparison of the images in (b) and (c)



in great condition, what more could I want? Obviously I wanted the missing ones. But he had no further knowledge nor interest. The final fact I remember was that his business was up for sale. I was tempted to try and buy it. After all when beautiful lantern slides are acquired free of charge through a business which is already making a profit, surely that is the icing on the cake!"

I believe Peter Gillies and myself share an important collection that has been split two ways – but why and when? I probably have the answer to this as I have encountered the same situation many times in my profession as an antique furniture dealer. When there has been a death in the family and two parties inherit an equal share of an estate, the heirs often insist that many of the assets are simply split exactly down the middle. For example, each might take four of a set of eight Georgian dining chairs even though the complete set is worth much more than the total of the two halves separately. Is this what happened with the slides? Both collections were acquired near the Welsh border – the same subjects, manufacturers, markings, etc. Was the skip hire

business owner the inheritor or had he collected them in a skip? We will never know. Thankfully these slides were not used as kindling, but they have started a fire in my own heart to show how important it is that we all work together and share collections. I believe something truly magical happened at Lacey Green, well beyond all our expectations, with the extraordinary reunion of a collection after who knows how long. Peter and I are now sharing more information and hopefully more complete sets will emerge in the future.

Many MLS members have heard me say after a show "never again" or "that was definitely my last show". I am indebted to Peter and Delia Gillies for letting me acquire some of the slides for my own collection and with that in mind ... I may be planning my very final show!

... and for the next meeting

Following Martin's very successful call-out for and session on dissolving views missing something, for our next meeting we are asking members to look out and bring along their most unusual 'skipping' slides. Many of us have a skipping slide or two as the mechanism works so well – and they can be endlessly repeated. Girls, clowns, Harlequin or acrobats are often featured, but do you have one of a strange character or creature doing the skipping, and maybe you know the story behind it? Bring it along to the Swedenborg Hall on 22 October.

