

## MISS WILLMOTT'S LANTERN LECTURES

*Sandra Lawrence*

*"Colour Photography. Miss E. Willmott, FLS, FRHS, exhibited in the lantern, a magnificent series of pictures and views made by means of the Sanger-Shepherd Process of Colour Photography. Very many of the slides gave very beautiful representations of specimen plants and groups of plants in Miss Willmott's garden, others landscapes and sea views at Warley and Italy, and reproductions of oil paintings &c. at Warley Place.*

*"Many of the slides were exceedingly beautiful and realistic and gave an excellent idea of the capabilities of the process. Miss Willmott made comments on the pictures and recounted the difficulties and triumphs attending the taking of the views and subjects. The audience was deeply interested, and many most flattering comments and warm thanks were expressed. The apparatus and the process appeared to be expensive and difficult, but the exhibit showed that in skilful hands this method of coloured photography was quite in the front rank of this wonderful and most useful invention."*

This quotation is from the magazine *Essex Naturalist* (Vol. 18, 1915), and although it's mainly about early colour photography, it is particularly interesting for its – albeit fleeting – reference to Miss Ellen Willmott's work with magic lanterns, something which up to now has not been much considered.

Ellen Ann Willmott (1858–1934) is best known today as a brilliant, if flawed, horticulturalist. She created three extraordinary gardens: Warley Place, near Brentwood in Essex; Tresserve, near Aix-les-Bains in the French Alps; and Villa Boccanegra, on a cliff in the Italian Riviera. She wrote two books, won hundreds of prizes and famously became one of the first woman Fellows of the Linnaean Society. Ellen Willmott could grow plants no one else could even germinate. She excelled at music, science and, we have recently discovered, photography. Born to wealthy middle-class parents (from the



*Ellen Willmott (courtesy of the Berkeley Family and the Spetchley Gardens Charitable Trust)*

age of seven she used to come down to breakfast on her birthday to find a nice little cheque for £1,000 on her plate – around £133,000 today) she inherited the equivalent of millions but, crucially, was never taught how to use her wealth. She burned through extraordinary sums in a few short years and would end her life practically bankrupt. This was not, however, going to stop her getting out, doing stuff and generally blasting through life. Ellen Willmott remained 'a contender' right up to her death.

Willmott probably began taking photographs in the early 1880s and continued right through to a month or so before she died. I have been helping to recover her correspondence, found rotting in the basement of her married sister's home, Spetchley Park, Worcester, in late 2019. We have been staggered by the sheer amount of material. There are dozens of boxes, mainly correspondence, usually in terrible condition: rotten, mouldy, infested and torn, but a fascinating window into a life that has, over the past 90-odd years, become a garden legend.

To our surprise, much of the material was photographic, and we are beginning to realise that our initial estimate of 10,000 glass plates, negatives and prints is very conservative indeed. We had known of around 900 glass-plate positives, depicting Willmott's homes and gardens in Essex, France and Italy, but were unprepared for the sheer variety of subject matter and format. Her work includes reportage, portrait, still life, landscape, botanical, historical re-enactment, general curiosities and travel, both at home and across Europe. She even played with the odd trick 'ghost' photograph. I am still working my way through her prints, and there are thousands to go.



*Warley Place (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*

Ellen's previous biographer, Audrey le Lievre (*Miss Willmott of Warley Place*, Faber, 1980) mentions magic lanterns only very briefly, recording that she gave shows to the local village children. I've been investigating her lantern work, however, and am beginning to realise that Ellen Willmott was actually a prolific lanternist, working over a very long period of time. Alas, the one thing we have not discovered in that cellar – so far – is a single magic lantern slide. There is a reason for this.

Willmott was known to buy and sell photographic equipment throughout her life, so we can only know what she had when she died. This means she almost certainly owned more than the four magic lanterns listed for sale in the 1935 auction that disposed of all her worldly goods. The sale took ten days – not bad for a 'bankrupt'.

Lots 969–1022 comprise Willmott's photographic equipment, from lenses to stereoscopic developing kit, and are only loosely grouped, often including unrelated items in job lots. The lantern equipment is not always listed in chronological order, making it hard to spot, but mainly begins with Lot 974: "A large limelight Magic Lantern in mahogany case, on adjustable platform with lens and fittings by Newton & Co, London, and stout deal



*East Meadow, Warley. This slide has an equivalent print image (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*





*Nankeen lilies at Warley (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*



*Trial beds at Warley, with Spetchley primroses (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*



*Ferns in the Alpine Ravine at Warley (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*

case." It is hard to know which lantern this would have been, as Newton operated from the 1850s to the 1940s and we have not yet started reading Ellen's bills and receipts. They are in particularly poor condition and there always seems to be something slightly more appealing to pull out of the mess that we have nicknamed the 'Willmott Tombola'. When I finally tackle the receipts there is more information to be gleaned but transcription is slow work. A pencil annotation by the auction catalogue entry tells us the lantern fetched £2 5s. which, for 'old tech', would have been a respectable sum in 1935.

Two other lanterns are unnamed: "A large limelight Magic Lantern," and "An oil lamp Magic Lantern, a Condenser, and sundry fittings". Willmott clearly favoured Newton, however, as Lot 990 is a "Newtonian Universal Science Lantern and stand". This would have cost £18 in 1904. The Bank of England Inflation Calculator translates this as £2,328 today.

The lantern is described in Newton's 1904 catalogue as having been "devised with a view to producing an instrument that shall be extremely portable and which shall yet be capable of producing with a minimum of trouble and rearrangement, most of the experiments required by lecturers on light, photography, colour and similar subjects". It has "a lantern-slide front, microscopic attachment and spectroscope front, and fitted to take instantly any of the instruments mentioned below without alteration". There follows a long list of accessories.

Later lots in the auction include a Newton's magic lantern stand and an unbranded "large magic lantern stand," while other equipment numbers "a Magic Lantern Screen and Photographic ditto", and "Thirteen optical flat Lenses and Thornton-Pickard Time and Instantaneous Shutter." Several lots focus on the taking, development and projection of stereoscopic slides, including two stereo cameras, dark slides, pairing frames and a Sanger Shepherd viewing box. These

strongly imply that Willmott may have once also presented stereo shows. Sadly we have not (yet) found a single example of her stereoscopic work.

It is only on reading the 1935 auction catalogue's section for magic lantern slides that it becomes clear why there are none appearing in the Spetchley collection. Many, many lots, along the lines of "Three Transit Boxes, containing a quantity of coloured slides, mostly historical and botanical", "Three Mahogany Cases containing a Quantity of Magic Lantern and Stereoscopic Slides" and "Two Transit Boxes of Similar Slides", tell us that pretty much everything was sold in 1935.

Willmott clearly owned a huge collection – easily hundreds but possibly thousands – of regular lantern slides, many of which she would have made herself. Some would have been purchased, often from Newton & Co. Other lots are more frustrating. Lot 977, "A Large Variety of Mechanical Coloured slides, in Stout Leather Case," and Lot 981, "a Canvas Case of Mechanical Slides", give no indication of what type of mechanical slides these were, nor the subject.

Just one hundred slides attributed to Ellen Willmott are known today. They live in the History of Science Museum at Oxford and lend a tiny glimpse into Willmott's magical lantern world. We do not yet know if she gave these slides to the museum or they were purchased. We do know that in the late 1920s and early 1930s British institutions such as the V&A, the Science Museum and even the Worshipful Company of Turners were vying for Willmott's collection of rare scientific instruments. She was friendly enough with their curators and had lent or given items in the past but she was very good friends with the Oxford museum's controversial director. Robert T. Gunther was having trouble founding his new 'History of Science' collection as part of the established Ashmolean Museum and Ellen Willmott recognised a beleaguered soul when she saw one. She sold Gunther items at a

decent price, or donated them, the most spectacular being a Holzappfel lathe that the other individuals and institutions had not-very-subtly had their eyes on. We hope some newly-discovered letters may tell us more about the provenance of the lantern slides.

They make a strange collection. Some are clearly purchased, for example a 'God Bless Her, Longest British Reign' motto slide from Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, and a very beautiful (complete) collection of microscopic images *Life of a Plant*, by Newton & Co. Other individual slides from commercial story sets may be the remnants of shows given to local children. 'Will-of-the-Wisp' was identified at the Summer 2022 MLS meeting as being from the



*Sanger Shepherd slide showing deterioration (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*



*'Longest British Reign' slide (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*





*Triple slide of flowers at Warley (courtesy of History of Science Museum)*

36-slide set *Natural Phenomena* by Joseph Levi & Co., c. 1890.

The vast majority of the extant slides, however, are either of Willmott's own gardens at Warley or of her plants. Most are coloured, some via the Sanger Shepherd process, a few of which have, alas, become unstable, colour-wise (see p. 8 bottom left). More are hand-tinted with varying degrees of skill, ranging from pretty decent, to frankly amateurish; it is possible Ellen entertained her sister's children by getting them to colour some slides for her.

Some colour images are, however, superb. They are definitely Willmott's as we have found monochrome print versions of the same photographs, but the quality is so very much better that it is possible she had them professionally coloured. I would value any work done by MLS members on professional hand-tinting in the period.

Some images were produced for the magazine *Country Life*, perhaps from Miss Willmott's original photographs (she enjoyed a close relationship with the magazine). Others, of Gertrude Jekyll's home at Munstead Wood, are reproduced from photographs by Jekyll herself. Yet another group, mislabelled in the Oxford catalogue as by Willmott, despite being of Warley Place, have been pointed out by Paula Sewell as being taken by professional photographer Reginald Malby. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) holds a collection of slides by Malby and this includes different images of Warley but labelled in the same hand.

As the slides are digitised by the History of Science Museum, new examples attributed to Willmott are turning up elsewhere in their collection, including a set of commercially produced comic slipping slides. Certainly, the *schadenfreude* nature of the slides' typical subject matter would appeal to Ellen's Victorian sense of humour. Jeremy Brooker has suggested that the 'EW' stickers on many of Ellen's slides may indicate that they once have belonged to Royal Polytechnic lecturer Edmund Wilkie; close examination may help to clarify this.

All in all, the slides' provenance is a little muddled, not helped by the fact that, in the 1940s, a previous curator removed Ellen's slides from their original wooden boxes (engraved with Willmott's name and address) to house his own. Some 'rogues' have also crept in which, despite being listed as Willmott's, were almost certainly never part of her collection – but most should be easy to identify now we have so many newly-discovered images of Warley Place.

Willmott's correspondence helps put together part of the picture. "Was doing a Magic Lantern [show] for the Soho Girls Club last night & not in bed until 1-30-am," she wrote to her friend Edward 'Gussie' Bowles (30 March, year unknown). The Soho Girls club was an early, YMCA-style hostel for poor women, founded in the 1880s. In another communication, to a Mr Cowley, written on the death of Gertrude Jekyll in 1932, Willmott mentions a lantern lecture about her friend that she had given to the Garden Club a couple of years earlier. Presumably she used the *Country Life* images along with others now lost.

A letter from the RHS dated 19 February 1920 reveals that Willmott also hired their slides. On that occasion it was "a number of coloured slides of snowdrops which have been prepared for lantern use." Willmott is warned that "... they can only be used with a lantern that is specially fitted with a water-bath cooler. Without this there is a great danger that the heat of the lamp may crack some of the slides and in this case they are too valuable to run any risk." Presumably she had the necessary kit – she had everything else. The hire fee was half a guinea. Alas, the set has not yet turned up in the RHS slide archive.

On 25 March the same year, Willmott received a request from the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire to present a show in the lecture theatre of the museum. The offer included the use of the museum's new, state-of-the-art electric lantern and the services of a lanternist should she require one. Once again, the subject matter is not mentioned, but this may have been the occasion she first met Robert Gunther.

Hidden within the collection at the History of Science Museum are seven puzzles: 'identical' triple images, in black and white, that turn out to be very early colour slides. So far it is unclear whether they are photochromatic Kromscop images from around 1895 or whether they relate to Willmott's later, Sanger Shepherd times. The subject matter, which includes images from the Alps, suggests the later date.

Ellen would have shown these slides with her Universal Science Lantern. The catalogue declares that "a photochromoscope can be substituted in five seconds". Martin Gilbert, who owns the only example of a Newtonian Universal Science Lantern that I know – and, what's more, in full working order – tells me that switching the attachments is, indeed, the work of moments. The showman (or in this case show-woman) would first have displayed the three black and white images side by side before, with a grand flourish, magically merging them into one luridly coloured wonder of science.

All in all, Ellen Willmott's magic lantern work is both a mystery and an opportunity – and I am only at the beginning of my investigation.

So, finally, I would also like to ask MLS members a favour. Clearly hundreds, if not thousands, of Ellen Willmott's slides were sold in 1935. They could be of absolutely anything (see above range of her photographic interests then add a new category: 'Anything and Everything Else') but may be recognisable by her name and/or that of her gardens: Warley, Tresserve, Boccanegra. Depending on the outcome of any examination of the mysterious 'EW' stickers, these may be a clue too. On the other hand, they may have no identification on them at all. If any MLS member suspects that one or more Willmott images may have found their way into their own collections, I would *love* to know about even those that might possibly be Ellen's, merely for the sheer delight of knowing they exist. If you find anything, please, get in touch!