

THE ROUTE OF THE OVERLAND MAIL TO INDIA

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THERE IS A GROUP of entertainments from the early and middle years of the nineteenth century for which little physical evidence remains. The list includes such entertainments as dioramas, panoramas, moving panoramas, magic lantern shows and peepshows.

The Diorama building in London still stands, near Regent's Park, but none of its contents have survived. A few fixed panoramas are still in existence around the world, but arguably they are not the best of the many that were produced in the nineteenth century. Several American moving panoramas exist, but none of them have been shown in anything like their original form for the last 50 years. Magic lantern shows are perhaps the only example of these entertainments that can still be seen in something approaching their original form, but even then slides from the early years of the nineteenth century are uncommon, and they are rarely used in the way they would have been shown originally. From the numbers of these various shows that were advertised, and from the sizes of the audiences, it is obvious that the performance of these entertainments was a major factor in life at this period.

A moving panorama was a painting on a long strip of cloth, which was wound from one reel to another, usually behind a frame, while an audience watched. In general I will use the term 'moving panorama' for this entertainment, although *The Route of the Overland Mail*, for one, was often described as a diorama. In the nineteenth century a number of terms were used interchangeably, in particular 'panorama', 'diorama' and 'myriorama'. 'Diorama' more correctly describes a fixed painting that could be lit from both sides so that a change in state could be effected, and the use of the term for this entertainment suggests that the moving panorama may have included dioramic effects. 'Myriorama' was an alternative name for a moving panorama, used most frequently by the shows of the Poole family.

HISTORY OF THE MOVING PANORAMA

Moving panoramas were first used for theatrical effects. In the theatre of the early nineteenth century they were very common. At this time they were often painted by known artists of the period: Clarkson Stanfield (1793–1867) painted moving panoramas for the annual pantomime, first at Astley's Theatre and later at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, from 1819 to 1839¹. A playbill for 10 January 1832 describes Stanfield's moving panorama of 'Venice and its Adjacent Islands', which featured in a pantomime entitled *Harlequin and Little Thumb or the Seven Leagued Boots*². At the same time David Roberts (1796–1864) was painting moving panoramas for the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. This was a golden age for scene painting, since improvements in theatrical lighting meant that the scenery could become a major and important component of the experience of a visit to the theatre.

By about 1845 interest in moving panoramas had declined in Britain, but in the United States interest continued because of a combination of factors. Much of the early exploration of the interior of North America was by river, and the moving panorama was an ideal way to show the sights that could be seen along the water's edge. Also, travelling shows prospered in the US, and the moving panorama was an entertainment well suited to a showman's wagon. A 360-degree fixed panorama would not have been so suitable for travelling between the new communities in the States.

In 1849 there was a sudden surge of new interest in moving panoramas in London, caused initially by the arrival of two moving panoramas from America. The first of these was Banvard's moving panorama of the Mississippi River. The key innovation that sparked the resurgence of interest was the fact that the moving panorama

was now a complete show in itself, presented by a lecturer, rather than just a scenic element of a larger show. Having a showman to explain the scenes increased the level of interest, and from that time until the arrival of cinema, and in some cases well beyond it, moving panoramas were a popular form of entertainment.

Banvard's Mississippi was soon followed by another Mississippi panorama, by Risley and Scott, and this created a rush to produce other moving panoramas showing subjects of specific interest to the British population. *The Route of the Overland Mail to India* was one of the first British-made moving panoramas, and it was followed by many others. *Overland Mail* was exhibited at the Gallery of Illustration in London's Regent Street between 1850 and 1852, and was shown a total of 1,600 times to approximately 400,000 people³.

Contemporary newspapers show five moving panoramas on offer to the London public in May 1850. The other four were on *Lisbon*, *California*, *The Nile* and *Slavery*⁴. At the end of May 1850 a second version of the *Overland Mail* opened in London. This was produced by the author and showman Albert Smith (1816–60), and performed in Willis's Rooms in King Street. The moving panorama was painted for Smith by William Beverley (1814–89), who was a major scenic artist of the time. The route featured was not the common route taken at the time, for Smith included the Egyptian Pyramids, and the journey was from Suez to Boulogne, following an alternative route across France from Marseille. Albert Smith became the leading showman for these entertainments, and he went on to produce several other moving panoramas, including his famous *Ascent of Mont Blanc*. These were shown at the Egyptian Hall in London throughout the decade until 1860⁵.

By about 1866, the initial surge of interest had run its course, and moving panoramas had become, to an extent, a source of amusement – as for example in Artemus Ward's spoof panorama *Artemus Ward Among the Mormons*⁶. However, they continued as a fairground attraction: Hamilton and the Pooles showed moving panoramas in British fairgrounds for the rest of the nineteenth century, and the last-ever moving panorama show in Britain is believed to have been a Poole's show in Edinburgh in 1929⁷. These travelling shows made extensive use of effects, including orchestras, singers, smoke, and even small cannons that could fire out of the panorama during battle scenes.

Although the claims of the advertising material for moving panoramas often seem exaggerated as to their length (Banvard's was said to be 'painted on four miles of cloth'), it is likely that they were in fact significantly long. Rough calculations suggest that the *Overland Mail* must have been something over 400 feet (120m) long. Moving panoramas showed either a continuous view, which would pass slowly in front of the audience, or a series of separate views.

One thing that is particularly noticeable about the moving panorama is how modern it seems as a form of entertainment. We are all used to seeing the type of travel documentary where the presenter takes the viewer on a 'journey' (Michael Palin's BBC television programmes are perhaps the best recent example). The format of these documentaries is directly comparable to the format of the moving panorama, with a series of short scenes and descriptions of the most interesting stages of the journey, and so it can be argued that the travel documentary predated the invention of cinema by 50 years. Other aspects that would be familiar to viewers in the twenty-first century include the use of sponsorship. The *Overland Mail* moving panorama was sponsored by the P&O (Peninsular and Orient) shipping line, which ran the ships on the route. There were also marketing spin-offs, including two souvenir books, one with simple illustrations and some of the text of the

NOTES

1. See *The Spectacular Career of Clarkson Stanfield 1793–1867* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Tyne and Wear County Council Museums, 1979).
2. Playbill, Theatre Royal Drury Lane, 10 January 1832.
3. *The Campaigns of Wellington: Programme of the Moving Panorama*, Gallery of Illustration (London: 1852).
4. *The Times*, 17 May 1850.

5. For more on Albert Smith see Raymond Fitzsimmons, *The Baron of Piccadilly* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967).
6. Artemus Ward [Charles Farrar Browne], ed. T.W. Robertson and E.P. Hingston, *Artemus Ward's Lecture* (London: 1869).
7. Hudson John Powell, *Poole's Myriorama! A Story of Travelling Panorama Showmen* (Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire: ELSP, 2002), 148.

lecture and the other with more detailed illustrations.⁸ A series of watercolour paintings was also produced of the scenes from the panorama.⁹ Sets of lantern slides were soon available and the musical accompaniment was sold as sheet music.

THE OVERLAND MAIL

The subject of the Overland Mail would have been of considerable interest to the contemporary audience. In the early days of the British colonisation of India, travelling to India involved a long and perilous journey around the tip of Africa. In a sailing ship this took many months. The invention of steamships and the opportunity to travel overland across Egypt between two shorter sea voyages was a major breakthrough. Although initial discussions and projections had not been positive, the P&O Company eventually set up the route, partly because of the persistence of Lieutenant Thomas Waghorn (1800–50), who managed the overland section. It had been predicted that nine ships would be needed, carrying ten passengers and a few boxes and bags on each trip. The actual traffic required 23 ships, and each trip carried 100 passengers and four tons of mail.

The length of the voyage to India was reduced from four and a half months to six weeks, and the use of this route made large profits for the P&O Company.¹⁰ It was not just of interest to the British: the Dutch also used the overland route to carry mail to their colonies in the Dutch East Indies. Ships set out on the route from Southampton on the fourth and twentieth of each month. A typical passage on the overland route cost about £100, depending on which town in India was the destination.¹¹ Although this was slightly more expensive than the route via the Cape of Good Hope, the fact that so much time was saved meant that for passengers it was much more popular, and by 1854 the route via South Africa was being phased out.

Incidentally, there is a strong tradition that the word ‘posh’ derived from travel to India at this time. For the most comfortable voyage through the Mediterranean and Red Seas, travellers would want to have a cabin on the north side of the ship, away from the hot sun. This meant the port side travelling to India and the starboard side travelling back to the UK. So the VIPs of the day would travel ‘Port Out Starboard Home’. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says there is no evidence for this derivation, but it is a good story anyway.

THE OVERLAND MAIL MOVING PANORAMA

In the Victorian era, people with relations living or working in India would have had a major personal interest in the subject and so would have been keen to see a panorama or other entertainment on the Overland Route. This was also the period when travellers to the Middle East were bringing back pictures of the local sights, so this part of the world was becoming more familiar to people. Another consideration that would have increased the audience for this panorama was the fact that at the time theatres were still not regarded as totally respectable places for the Victorian middle class to visit. The Gallery of Illustration always described itself as a ‘gallery’ in order to allay such fears. This attempt to be respectable was rewarded by the reviewers: *Punch* described the moving panorama of the *Overland Mail to India* as ‘a most lovely work of art ... radiant with beauty, and sparkling with the most costly Indian gems’.¹² The *Illustrated London News* said, ‘Of the highly artistic nature of this magnificent work we can convey to the reader but a faint idea by description’.¹³

Working from the illustrations in the souvenir book, and contemporary sources, we can recreate a visit to the panorama. The Gallery of Illustration was at 14 Regent Street, the house that had belonged to the architect John Nash. A floor plan of the house shows a first-floor room about 70 feet (21m) long and 30 feet (9m) wide, which was presumably the room used for the moving panorama.¹⁴ The audience paid one shilling for admission, or two shillings and sixpence for the stalls. It seems likely that this was a relatively small-scale entertainment: the dimensions of the room would suggest that the audience at any showing was no more than about 250. The panorama travelled behind an oval screen, which the illustration at the start of the souvenir book suggests would be about 8 feet (2.5m) long and 6 feet (2m) high.

There is a technical question about the general run of this moving panorama that cannot completely be answered: how continuous was the panorama? Much of the action

can be considered to represent the view from a port-side porthole of the ship that we are supposed to be sailing on, or the left-hand carriage window for the overland section. However, there are significant

1. The Route of the Overland Mail: Southampton



8. Both books appeared in 1850 and were entitled *The Route of the Overland Mail to India*, the former published by the Gallery of Illustration and the latter by Atchley & Company. The illustrations in this article are taken from the second of these books.

9. Six of these watercolours are reproduced in David and Stephen Howarth, *The Story of the P&O* (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1986).

10. John K. Sidebottom, *The Overland Mail: a Postal Historical Study of the Mail Route to India* (London: Postal History Society, 1948).

11. J.H. Stocqueler, *The Hand-Book of British India* (London: 1854), 80.

scenes that cannot be explained by this. In two of the images – Malta and Point de Galle – there are scenes of the harbour from the hill above.

Certainly the quality of this moving panorama seems to have been well above the general standard of the period. Albert Smith, in one of his articles, described this panorama as 'the beautiful diorama at the Gallery of Illustration'.¹⁵ This was praise indeed from a showman who ran a rival version of the *Overland Mail*.

Another question that to an extent remains unanswered is how much of this moving panorama depended on dioramic or transformation effects, and how these were achieved. There are significant scenes that look as though they were drawn for dioramic effect. For most of the panorama the front face of the painting must have been well lit, but at certain points it must have been possible to decrease the lighting in front of the panorama and increase the lighting behind it. Sections of the canvas in these scenes would have been replaced by thin gauze-like material so that light could shine through. At this period, all lighting effects would have been achieved by oil lamps. Other contemporary documents suggest that the use of dioramic effects like these was routine.

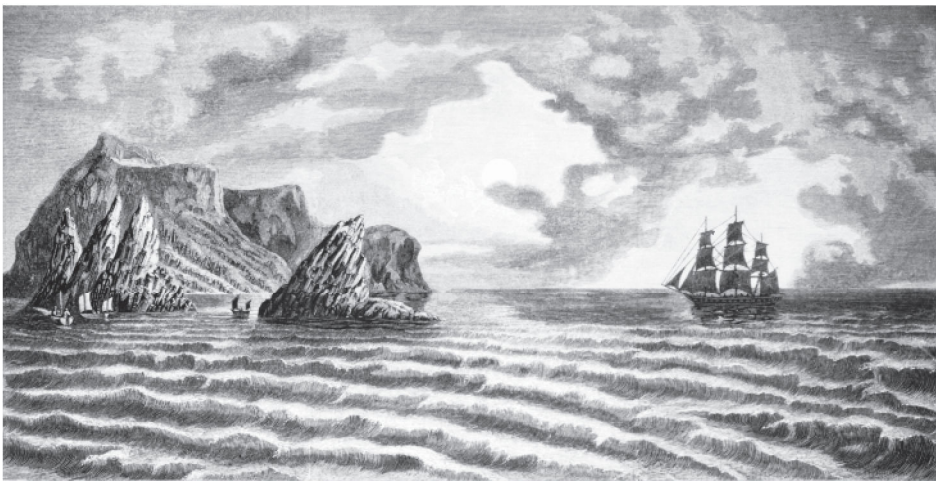
The lecturer describes the scenes as we 'travel' through them, and a band of musicians offstage plays melodies representing the countries visited. The journey starts in Southampton, where we board the ship. What exactly the musicians would have played to represent Southampton is unclear, but perhaps they produced sound effects of a busy port (Fig. 1).

We then sail down the Solent, viewing the Isle of Wight and Osborne House. In 1850 Osborne House was still being reconstructed, having been bought by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1845. Following the coast of the Isle of Wight our last sight of Britain is the Needles rocks. The panorama predates the lighthouse in that location (Fig. 2)

We then sail across the Bay of Biscay and down the coast of Spain and Portugal. When the Bay of Trafalgar is reached, the lecturer must have talked about the famous naval battle, which had occurred only some 45 years earlier. Indeed it is possible that some of the people who visited the moving panorama could have fought in the battle.

Gibraltar is the first 'coaling station' (for replenishing the ship's fuel supply) on the route. Then there is a brief visit to Algiers in North Africa, before the ship passes Panteria and Galletria and reaches Malta (Fig. 3). Here we leave the ship to see the view from above the harbour. It is not clear how this transition was achieved. It is possible that a curtain was drawn, the scene moved on, and the curtain drawn back: the frontispiece of the larger souvenir book shows a curtain, but it is outside the oval frame behind which the moving panorama was shown. It would seem more likely that a curtain could be lowered between the frame and the panorama itself.

The next scene in the book is the port of Alexandria, where the overland part of the route commences. The fact that the entire journey was called the Overland Route is something of a misnomer. Even before the construction of the Suez Canal the maximum distance overland was perhaps only 180 miles (300km), and in any case



2. The Needles



3. Malta



4. Mahmoudi

12. 'Putting a Panorama Round the Earth', *Punch*, Vol. 18 (1850), 208.

13. 'Exhibitions for Easter', *Illustrated London News*, 30 March 1850.

14. Hermione Hobhouse, *A History of Regent Street* (London: Macdonald & James, 1975), 42–3.

15. Mike Simkin, 'Albert Smith, a Nineteenth-Century Showman', in L.M.H. Smith, David Henry and Dennis Crompton (eds), *The Ten Year Book: New Magic Lantern Journal Volume 4*. (London: Magic Lantern Society, 1986), 68–71. This quotation is from p.68.



5. Boulac

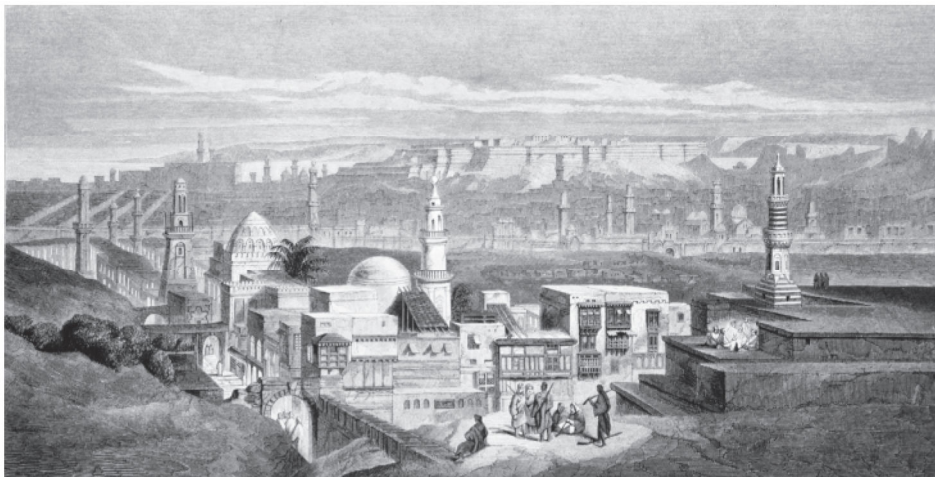
the first two parts of the 'overland' section were by boat, on the Mahmoudi Canal (Fig. 4) and the River Nile. The Mahmoudi Canal was cut from one of the rivulets of the Nile delta, and formed a link between Alexandria and Atfeh on the Nile. On the Mahmoudi Canal we travel by barge, pulled by a small steam tug. From Atfeh to Boulac we take a specially constructed Nile steamer. Arriving at Boulac the short journey to Cairo is undertaken by horsedrawn omnibus. In Cairo we wait in the Great Eastern Hotel for a steamer to arrive in Suez.

The scene at Boulac (Fig. 5) is almost certainly one where dioramic effects were used. To quote from the smaller of the two souvenir books, 'Boulac is the port of Cairo. In the diorama the steamer is supposed to

have arrived late at night'. We are transported on to Suez by carriage, and in the main the scene in the panorama seems to be the view from the left-hand window of the carriage. The *Punch* article said of the carriages:

*The omnibuses by-the-bye are very like our bathing machines, with the curtains taken off. If they are licensed to carry fourteen inside, we should be very sorry to be the fourteenth. They have no stand, either, for the conductor behind, which must be very inconvenient if a Sheikh wants to be taken up, or any 'son of a dog' wants to be put down, in the middle of the desert.*¹⁶

Several of the scenes in this section seem to be dioramic in content.



6. Cairo

The scene that shows Cairo most clearly seems to have been drawn for an oval frame (Fig. 6). We then visit the Cemetery, and after passing a dead camel (Fig. 7) – *Punch* said 'camels too are dying, which is a great proof of the picture's accuracy, for we never recollect a view of the desert yet, but there was sure to be a camel dying in it' – arrive at the Central Station, where the travellers are fed and watered by the P&O Company. There are then scenes of Arabs on Horseback; Encampment by Night (which seems to have been drawn for dioramic effects); Women Drawing Water; and Joseph's Well, before the sea is reached again at Suez (Fig. 8). Again the view of Suez would seem to be a diorama, with the lights in the ships and the light of the sun on their sails being areas where

the light could have come from behind the scene. At Suez there was a dump of 6,000 tons of coal that had been transported across the desert by camel. Perhaps this explains the high fatality rate among the Egyptian camel population.

We then board ship and sail down the Red Sea. With the certainty of the Victorian age, the lecturer indicates the exact place in the Red Sea where Moses parted the waters for the Israelites to cross. Again the view seems to be from a porthole on the port side of the ship. We pass Jeddah and then Mocha, which even in the 1850s must have been an interesting sight. Mocha was the town that until about 1750 had the world monopoly on the sale of coffee; when the monopoly was taken away, the town fell into ruins. Next we reach the coaling station at Aden.

From here we sail across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and again we leave the ship, this time to see the harbour

7. Demise of a camel



16. 'Putting a Panorama Round the Earth'.
17. 'Putting a Panorama Round the Earth'.
18. Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1978), 480.
19. Jersey Times, 6 July 1875, cited in Damer Waddington, *Panoramas, Magic Lanterns, Cinemas: A Century of 'Light' Entertainment in Jersey 1814–1914* (St Lawrence, Jersey: Tocan Books, 2003), 13.
20. Mimi Colligan, *Canvas Documentaries: Panoramic Entertainments in Nineteenth-Century Australia and New Zealand* (Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 25.

of Point de Galle from the hill above (Fig. 9). Rejoining the ship, we then sail up the east coast of India, calling at Madras before reaching our final destination, Calcutta (Fig. 10). The article in *Punch* commented:

*We have reached Calcutta – and by the noise and shuffling are reminded that we have never left London. It is most curious on coming out into Regent Street to find that the porters and cabmen are not black, and that persons are riding on horses instead of camels.*¹⁷

After the successful show at the Gallery of Illustration, the moving panorama of *The Overland Route* went on tour to other cities in the UK. The Gallery of Illustration next showed a panorama of *The Campaigns of Wellington*, starting in 1852.

The Route of the Overland Mail returned to the Gallery of Illustration in 1853, with further scenes added and an amended title of *The Overland Mail to India and Australia*. During the Crimean War (1854–6) scenes were added to show the route of the British Army to the war and Sebastopol. The lecturer explained the course of the war with the help of the moving panorama and diagrams of the fortifications and weapons.¹⁸ The panorama's content was later edited back to show just the overland route. Other modifications included the addition of the lighthouse at the Needles, in or after 1859, and a transformation scene here showing a famous shipwreck. After 1869 the Suez Canal was added to the Egyptian scenes. Finally, the panorama became a part of Poole's travelling panorama show, and was used in their shows for many years. It was recorded as having been in Jersey in 1875.¹⁹

'CREDITS'

The lecturer for *The Overland Route* was Joachim Hayward Stocqueler (1800–85), who was a journalist, playwright and expert on India. He had spent 24 years in India as a journalist and author, and wrote the *Hand-Book of British India*, which as well as detailed information on the India of the 1850s also gave detailed descriptions of the passage, including the meals passengers could expect as they sailed the Red Sea. Stocqueler also wrote plays, including *A Good Name*, which was performed at the London Lyceum on 26 May 1845. A recent book on panoramas and moving panoramas in Australia includes a portrait drawing of him.²⁰ His son Edwin Stocqueler became a painter of panoramas.

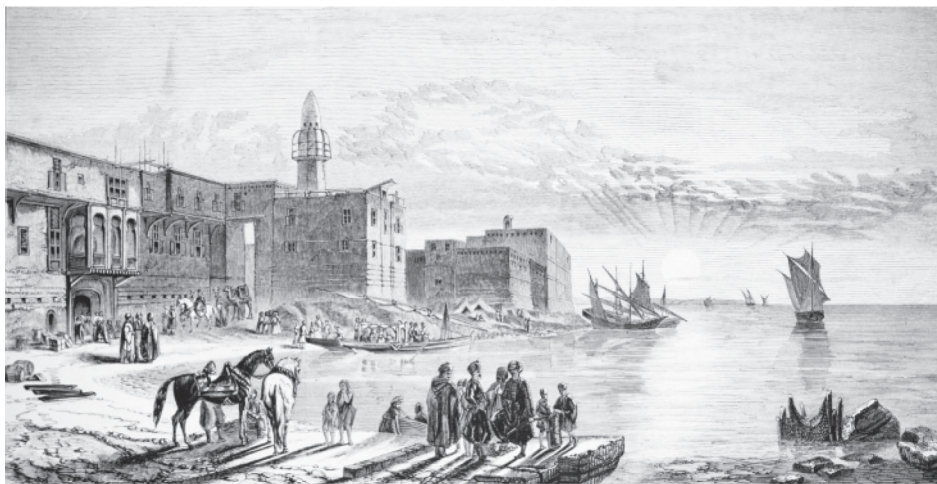
The painter David Roberts, who had travelled widely in the Middle East and brought back watercolour paintings of the sights, supplied sketches for the illustrations of the overland section. Roberts had previously painted moving panoramas himself, so would have been familiar with the medium.

The main work of painting the panorama was undertaken by Thomas Grieve (1799–1882) and William Telbin (1813–73). John Absolon (1815–95) painted the figures. Grieve and Telbin were both known artists, and at the time were working as the scene painters at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. They had both worked with Clarkson Stanfield on his moving panoramas used in the shows there. Absolon, another known artist of the time, was also then working at Drury Lane.

The music for the moving panorama was composed by Rophino Lacy (1795–1867), and was published as sheet music, including the 'Overland Polka'.

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This article is based on a talk given to the Magic Lantern Society in September 1997, which was subsequently given at the 'Visual Delights' Conference at the University of Sheffield in July 1999.



8. Suez



9. Galle, Ceylon



10. Calcutta