

A POSTCARD FROM MR HILL

Lester Smith

After seeing Robin Palmer's wonderful slides of Switzerland at our April meeting in London, it brought to mind a project I started six years ago. I too have bought a great many lantern slides with the name of E.H. Wilkie written on them. Just to remind people, Edmund Henry Wilkie (1857–1935) began work as a lanternist at the age of 17, and appeared at the Royal Polytechnic Institute a few years later.

After the Polytechnic closed in 1882, Mr Wilkie continued to paint and make lantern slides commercially from his home. He advertised extensively in the trade magazines that he could supply slides on almost every subject. What he was particularly interested in was the design of effect and animated slides and he published several series on how this had been done at the Polytechnic in the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, a little like a magician giving his secrets away.¹ I believe him to have been the most innovative of all the slide makers in this respect and in fact several lantern suppliers sold (or copied) his designs.

Large collections of his slides have appeared at auction and mostly consist of travel in foreign lands. He assembled various series of slides: Switzerland, Egypt, Ireland, America, the Mediterranean, Wonders of the World and A Trip Around the World, to name but a few, the latter consisting of 225 slides. The others had typically about 85 or more. All these sets contained mechanical effects and dissolves and they often contained slides painted by other artists such as W.R. Hill and Carpenter & Westley. This suggests to me that Wilkie had acquired a lot of slides after the Polytechnic closed, and certainly as the cinema rapidly gained popularity and the lantern was not needed, slides rapidly became redundant except maybe for educational purposes.²

As an artist and a dealer (with a wife, in-laws and three children to support, according to the 1901 census) he was able to fulfil orders by supplementing his stock of hand-painted slides with photographic slides bought from Newton & Co. who probably had the largest stocks of photographic slides anywhere at that time. He then coloured these slides, the majority of which we find in each of these aforementioned series, and it was also easy to buy two or three of the same subject and turn them into day, sunset, night or what have you. He cut each slide open, coloured it and closed it up again with new tape over the original. He used 7 inch x 4 inch frames supplied by the trade to fit the 3¼-inch slides, and after all the slides had been inserted he then had the important task of registering each one so that the image took up exactly the same position on the screen. There was space in the frame to allow the slide to be fixed into position by inserting 'spacers' on at least two sides of the slide, and when this was done to project them and make minor adjustments until he was satisfied. This work was essential for customers who required them for use in a biunial or triunial lantern. Wilkie was a perfectionist and dissolves and effects had to be managed impeccably. It is possible he might even have delivered the slides in person so that he could further 'trim' each slide to the owner's lantern.

I feel fortunate in having several large lots of Wilkie slides. The few here are from my 'Picturesque Ireland' series (Figs 1–5). Some were hand painted by Hill but the majority were 3¼-inch slides hand-coloured by Wilkie. After buying them, I started to examine them carefully and one or two of the slides fell out of their frames accompanied by slivers of thin cardboard. As many as five pieces fell out from each slide. Some had been placed horizontally and others vertically, obviously carefully placed to keep the slides in their exact position. I then noticed that the slivers were cut up from postcards with hints of ink writing and parts of postage stamps visible on either side. I also found I could join two or three of the pieces together and whole words began to appear. These slivers were only ⅛ inch wide, but this is where it got exciting. I proceeded to gently prise several more slides apart. Fortunately, when he assembled the slides, Wilkie only put the tiniest drop of glue on the end piece of the frame holding the slide in, knowing that he might need to reposition the slide again later, or maybe change it for another.

It was easy to check if there were strips of card simply by looking at the inside edge of the frame. If so, another pull and another clue would appear. I was doing no harm; the card did not need to go back exactly again because if they were needed they would have to be reregistered anyway. Besides, it was becoming compulsive.



1. An Irish jaunting car



2. The Blind Fiddler, Gap of Dunloe



3. Hill of Howth

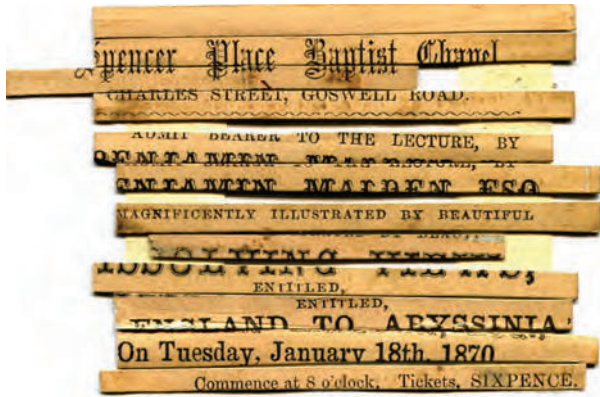


4. Westport Clew Bay

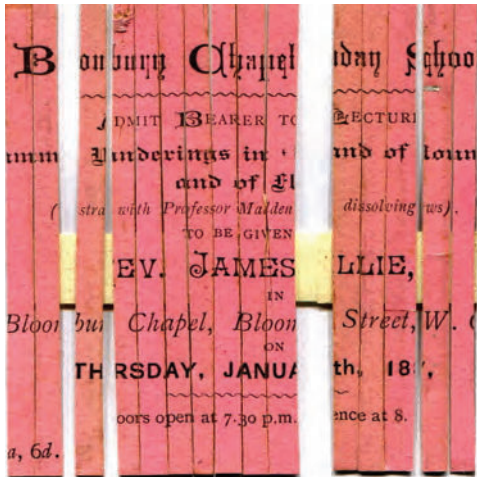


5. A Swiss slide titled 'Giesbach Waterfall, Winter' bearing the name of Edmund H. Wilkie. One might suppose that it was painted by him but actually it was painted by W.R. Hill (one of three dissolves), whose name appears under the glass. Wilkie put his name on all slides that passed through his hands and sometimes his address as well. His name and address may be found in the corner of his 3/4-inch slides.

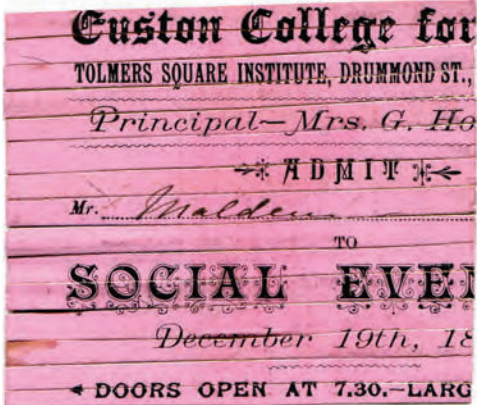
6. Spencer Place Baptist Chapel



7. Bloomsbury Chapel Sunday School



8. Euston College for Girls



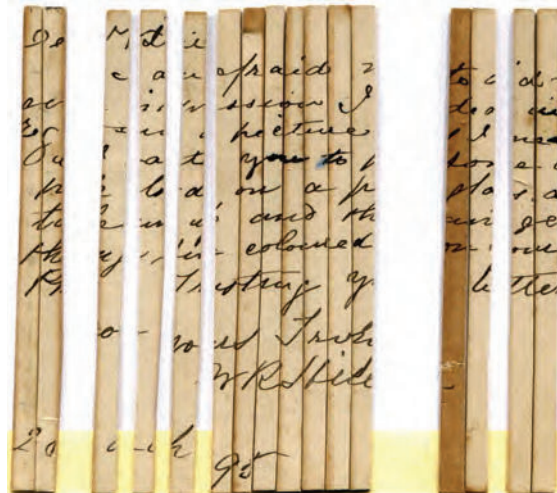
Most of them were addressed to Mr E.H. Wilkie, 114, Maygrove Road, Hampstead, N.W. Some were from tradesmen or artists' suppliers but a few were invitations to forthcoming lantern shows by Mr B.J. Malden.³ There were several other 'part' cards from various organisations but three of the best I have are: 'A lecture by Benjamin Malden Esq., magnificently illustrated by beautiful Dissolving Views entitled "England to Abyssinia", on Tuesday, January 18th, 1870', (Fig. 6) – 'Wanderings in A Land of Mountains and of (Flood ?)', illustrated with Professor Malden's dissolving views. To be given by the Reverend James Baillie on Thursday, January - th, 1887', (Fig. 7) an invitation to 'Admit Mr Malden to Social Evening, December 19th, 18-' (Fig. 8)

The postcard of the greatest interest to me was from Mr W.R. Hill, unfortunately not complete though it is possible to make out the address (Fig. 9), and parts of the message (Fig. 10) – 'Dear Mr Wilkie, I am afraid – picture – coloured – Trusting you get much better [he was in bad health in later life], Yours Truly, W.R. Hill', dated 29 March 1895. The postmark for Holloway can also be read. Sad to say the only complete cards I was able to construct were uninteresting trade cards. I know a great many E.H. Wilkie slides exist in collections with more postcards awaiting discovery but I can understand owners' reluctance to pull them apart. Curiosity may 'win out' though, as everyone enjoys a good jigsaw!

9. W.R. Hill's postcard (address)



10. W.R. Hill's postcard (message)



NOTES

1. 'Modern Optical Illusions' parts 1–8, September 1894–April 1895 and 'Optical and Mechanical Effects' parts 1–15, September 1898–April 1900, which can be found on the *From Magic Lantern to Movies: the Optical Magic Lantern Journal 1889–1903* DVD.
2. Further details about this can be found in the *Magic Lantern Newsletter* No. 104 for March 2011 entitled '20 Thousand Leagues Under The Sea'.
3. 'Benjamin John Malden (1838–1933)', *Magic Lantern Newsletter* No. 116, June 2014.