



Mike with one of his first magic lanterns

PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS MIKE SIMKIN

An interview profile by Jeremy Brooker

Jeremy Brooker: This might seem a strange time to ask – when you are just about to auction your collection – but I wondered whether you might be willing to be interviewed for *The Magic Lantern*? I'm not sure whether I have told you this, but yours was the first proper lantern show I ever saw. Janet Tamblin, Beryl Vosburgh and I made a pilgrimage to see you – and we were not disappointed. You were a great inspiration to us in those early days!

Mike Simkin: Thanks so much for asking! Part of the richness of my showman's memories is recalling people and shows, and I well remember you coming to Dorrington Road, Birmingham, on a very cold, snowy, icy day. The show was in the School of Photography and I remember skidding into the premises clutching boxes and lanterns. I have seen Janet's article and I appreciate everything you have asked. I will do my best to reply.

As the collection, the exhibitions, the performances and the research are now only memories, there is a sense of 'not belonging' by the fact of not going out to perform, give talks and conduct research.

Memories of the magic lantern are now very difficult to find and my original c.1980s audio tapes of conversations with local people who could recall using the magic lantern in the home, the Birmingham & Midland Institute, theatres and cinemas in the area have been lodged within the city of Birmingham.

When I started collecting in about 1964, there were not many like-minded and interested people but a few names which are now prominent are still to be revered and

listened to today – Bill and John Barnes, David Francis and David Robinson. Without the internet, the joy of collecting was by word of mouth, a local advert perhaps or *Exchange and Mart*, but my luckiest find came from the *Church Times* with a wonderful collection of hand-painted slides, including their original pair of lanterns, from Buckhorn Weston in the West Country. Otherwise each item I bought was fondly remembered by its owners with a complete provenance and only acquired through endless negotiation or constant re-visits. The search always proved the most exciting aspect of making an acquisition, whether in Warwick, Birmingham or Liverpool.

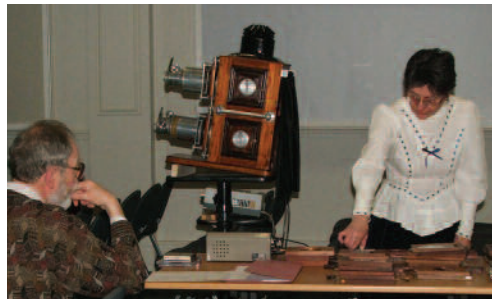
With the accumulation of material, supported by as much documentation as possible, it was always a great pleasure to show each item to the best of its potential. My most notable acquisitions were probably the Crighton Collection, belonging to a family of early bioscope operators, and the Isaac Knott Collection. This came after tireless negotiations with the owner of a junk shop in Wilmslow, meaning endless journeys up the M6. At

last, I had the chance to show these slides in their own demanding way, inserted both vertically and horizontally in the lantern to show the dramatic climb of Albert Smith and his adventures on Mont Blanc. My initial thought had been that they only told the story of Smith's ascent. As we became familiar with the slides we realised, by comparison with other material, that they actually combined the stories of two different ascents of the mountain. This led my wife Theresa and me to write an article about the intricacies of the narrative, which was published in the *MLS Newsletter* No. 116, June 2014.

The collection grew organically from 1969 onwards, aiming to illustrate the story of moving pictures between the late seventeenth and twentieth centuries. In collecting, the priority was always to find high-quality hand-painted slides, chosen to add substance and storytelling potential to the collection. The lanterns and accessories were acquired in order to illustrate their technical and historical significance and to show evolutionary developments. The shows and programmes obviously formed themselves from what I could find and the



Mike setting up a magic lantern show at Gas Hall (2006) (photograph Birmingham Museum of the Jewellery Quarter & Birmingham Library)



Mike and Theresa at Gas Hall (2006) (photograph Birmingham Museum of the Jewellery Quarter & Birmingham Library)



Gas Hall (2006) – with the aluminium lantern Mike bought for Theresa (photograph Birmingham Museum of the Jewellery Quarter & Birmingham Library)



At the Flatpack Festival (2010)





Ascent of Mont Blanc
(photograph Pete James)



Two vertical and two horizontal Isaac Knott
slides of the Ascent of Mont Blanc



Noakes triple lantern

staple diet was normally travel, humour, socio-cultural comment with the colour spectacle of artificial fireworks or chromatropes. When appropriate the programme would include a local narrative to engage and enthral audiences, whether it was in the city or countryside. Always in the back of my mind was a set of three 'e factors' – to entertain, to educate, to edify.

Setting up was always a critical matter, making sure everything was in perfect order for a complete performance lasting perhaps one hour or 90 minutes. The thrill was in welcoming the audiences and realising very quickly whether they were engaged or not and being able to tell if your verbal extemporisation and timings were in order. The performances that stand out in my memory and called for the greatest thoughtfulness and preparation were at the V&A and at the Long Melford Steam Rally, where the marquee was located below Harry Lee's steam yachts. We would see their spectacular shadows flying above our heads on the marquee roof. The most endearing shows were for the Science Museum steam rallies in Birmingham, which we gave on a regular basis. We could do five shows a day. We also gave Christmas shows in Birmingham, which were often held in the circular Council Chamber, giving a real air of magic and surrealism like *Alice in Wonderland*. Sadly, I don't have any photographs to remember these shows by.

Perhaps my most treasured memory was of working with Bill Douglas on the film *Comrades* in 1986. The joy of working with Bill was that he not only had a complete knowledge of the genre itself but also understood how your contribution might fit into his storyboarding. The thrill of working with a film-maker at the Old Vic in Bristol was unforgettable and the Noakes triple lantern will hopefully live for many years on the screen to show audiences the alarming catastrophe at sea when the boat went up in flames, all created with dissolving views.

Ephemera, prints and historical documents relating to the use of the lantern formed an essential part of the collection, and the knowledge gleaned from Hughes, Hepworth and Elizabeth Sempel helped greatly to understand more deeply the value and potential of both the lanterns and the slides during performances. The element of teaching through optical toys and the lantern has always been a central part of my interest and involvement. The equipment often formed part of my lectures which illustrated optical projection, and the evolution of moving imagery. In the outside world I was always delighted to present exhibitions and workshops for very young children at the Museum and Art Gallery as I believed movement, colour, light and shadows had such a powerful influence.

By nature, one is the custodian of a collection for only a short period, and during this time one is truly responsible for the care, conservation and function of these wonderful artefacts. In my case, I always enjoyed learning as much as I could about each object and luckily there were many with local connections to Birmingham – Carpenter & Westley, John Barnes Linnett (inventor of the flicker book), the Barker Panorama and the JWB toy paper theatres, not to mention a host of panoramas that came to the Town Hall and to Bingley Hall. This gave me an immense drive to make the most of the local history and cultural legacy. I set up the *Phantasmagoria Display* in 1979 as part of my teaching and pedagogic studies with the University of Central England, Warwick University, and for the local community. As curator, I found the collection was always available to furnish individual enquiries and local demands such as talks and performances. I always tried to answer phone enquiries within twenty minutes, usually with the objects or books in hand by the side of the telephone. It is with great regret that I could not find a permanent local home for the collection so it has now been distributed by auction. Hopefully the items will continue to give equal fulfilment and pleasure, and provide cherished memories for their new owners in the years to come.



THE MIKE SIMKIN MAGIC LANTERN COLLECTION AUCTION

On 7 July many members of the Magic Lantern Society found their way to Special Auction Services in Newbury – in person, by phone or via the internet. It was a privilege just to see Mike Simkin's wonderful collection of lanterns, 'scopes' of all kinds, slides and books. Over 300 lots commanded high prices based on their quality, rarity and, no doubt, provenance. Highlights included the Noakes triple lantern, a Reynaud coin-operated praxinoscope musical box, a kinora motion picture viewer, *Essay on Transparent Prints* (1807) by E. Orme, and two beautiful hand-painted Isaac Knott sets of *Scenes from the Indian Mutiny* – possibly used at the Royal Polytechnic – and the *Ascent of Mont Blanc* by Albert Smith and Erasmus Galton. Along the way there were many superb Carpenter & Westley slides, such as icescapes and views of the Holy Land and Egypt, as well as long slides, slippers, chromatropes (several hand-painted by Henry Langdon Childe) and a choreutoscope slide. The lots were testament to Mike's great skill in building up such a unique and valuable collection over the last 50 plus years.