

LANERNISTS' TALES THE HUMOROUS SIDE OF GIVING LANTERN SHOWS

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Although I started collecting magic lanterns in 1970, it was not until 2003 with the help of fellow Society member Tony Brown that we decided to undertake shows on a more regular basis. Upwards of 350 performances later, we can now look back on some very fond memories and, in particular, the funny situations and humorous characters we met along the way.

Our first 'foray' into presentations was with that wonderful organisation – The Women's Institute (WI). We never met such an eclectic not to say sometimes eccentric group of stalwart ladies anywhere! Each branch was totally autonomous and therefore independent in how they operated. Here are a few selected encounters we had while performing shows for them.

LANERN SHOW 1

The WI first introduced us to that grand and evocative anthem *Jerusalem*. Over the years we have heard it sung in every possible key, in every possible format and to every possible degree of ability. One rendition that sticks in our memory was at a WI group not far from home in Buckinghamshire. Their accompanist (in the loosest possible sense) evidently was a new recruit for this role. The piano for some reason had been moved to the back of the stage and was, as a result, completely out of sight. The stage curtains had been firmly closed and sealed in readiness for the local theatre club's performance the following evening – and the stage set-up was a closely guarded secret.

The accompanist duly mounted the stage, disappeared around the back and began to play in what can only be described as an 'Eric Morecambe–Les Dawson' style ... all the wrong notes and definitely not in the right order. Huge crashing chords and massive sustain effects rang out. This cacophony went on, and on ... and on, finishing off with an ear-splitting crescendo topped off with an echo that seemed to carry on forever – it must have been heard miles away. Suddenly a small face appeared through a little crack she had made in the curtain: "Was that alright?" We didn't have the heart to tell her that we had finished singing at least two minutes earlier and had already sat down. Our ears still ring to this day and we doubt the piano survived intact. Our show, by the way, passed off without further incident and – to our great relief – without the need for piano accompaniment!

LANERN SHOW 2

In our experience, WI ladies are clever, industrious but most of all curious! Tony and I were setting up the lantern for a show near Watford many years ago when suddenly at our side appeared a petite, very elderly lady with thick-lensed glasses wearing a hat that sported all manner of attached foliage. It later transpired that she was 93 years old and as sharp as a pin – nothing escaped her attention. Leaning forward she said, referring to our lantern: "I remember these things. They had all that gas stuff, didn't they?" We realised she must have been referring to a lantern with limelight illuminant. Amazingly, here was somebody who had actually seen one. Just then she leaned a little further forward and said: "Do you know, the lecturer I saw that evening was so boring that I trod on his tubes and turned out his light!"

We were mightily relieved when this feisty lady went and seated herself at the front, well away from our precious lantern. We did wonder how the lecturer concerned fared – but we will never know.



This is the first article in a series recounting the more unusual experiences of members who give magic lantern shows. Please let us have your anecdotes (editor@magiclantern.org.uk) – exact names and locations can be omitted!