

FROM THE IVORY TOWER MY FIRST SLIDE

Lydia Jakobs

Where did you find your first magic lantern slide? Was it in a box in an attic or a basement? At a flea market somewhere? Was it part of a collection, passed down from your parents or even grandparents? Everyone has their own story of how and why they began collecting, buying or simply owning slides. This is mine. If you would like to tell your story (with any research you have done on your slide), please send me an e-mail to jako2c01@uni-trier.de (or editor@magiclantern.org.uk) so we can turn this into a series.

I bought my very first lantern slide this year at the MLS's Convention in Birmingham. On last day of the market I had finally made up my mind – I was going to become a slide owner. I had worked with lantern slides as part of my research for almost eight years but had kept what I considered my scholarly distance, engaging with the collecting community without become a member. But somehow, moved by the marvellous performances and inspiring conversations at the Convention, this felt like the right time to change all that.

Wandered between the tables, picking up this slide and that, I decided that my first slide was going to be two things: beautiful and unrelated to my academic work. This meant no Life Model slides and especially none based on any of George R. Sims's many poems. I found what I didn't know I was looking for in a pile of loose slides on Mervyn Heard's table. As I held the slide that was going to be mine up to the light (you can see a re-enactment in Fig. 1), I could barely make out a man with a horse that had a giant lantern hanging from its neck. The colours on the painted glass were dark but the lantern in the centre of the image cast a warm light on the whole scene.

As I put the slide on a nearby lightbox, the small image became slightly clearer. I could make out a rocky landscape with a narrow footpath leading through high grass. A cloudy night sky and what I thought were the sails of a windmill barely visible in the background. To me, the entire scene seemed impossibly romantic, a group of forlorn wanderers, passing through the fields on a dark and stormy night, guided by their faithful horse. I couldn't fully decipher the handwritten slide title – but I didn't need to. I was in love and this slide was coming home with me.

Once the first infatuation began to fade, I attempted to learn more about my new treasure. Identifying the slide was surprisingly easy, thanks to Lucerna and the numbers scribbled on the slide. A search for 'ckers' (the part of the handwriting I was able to read – you can see for yourself in Fig. 2) returned only one slide with the number 22 produced by Newton & Co. Judging from the address given on the label for the manufacturer Newton & Co., the slide was most likely produced before 1912.¹ It belonged to a set of forty slides, the first part of an adaptation of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and it was called 'The Wreckers' – a term I had never heard of.

The reading, a sermon titled *Pilgrim's progress: from destruction to the Cross*, that formed part of Newton's Lantern Services series was not available in the MLS slide readings library or elsewhere on

the internet. There was a digital copy of another Newton slide set, *Opportunity*, with a slide titled 'The Wreckers' Light'. A passage from the reading offers an description of what exactly this 'wrecking' business entailed and how the horse and the lantern were involved:

It was, as you know, a not uncommon thing a hundred years ago, on some dangerous parts of our coast, where the inhabitants found it much to their profit when a wreck occurred, to endeavour to lure vessels to their destruction by false lights, sometimes hung on the neck of a horse which was driven along the shore in bad weather, so that the motion resembled that of a ship's light. A captain or pilot seeing it, unable to see where the land lay, took for granted that he might safely follow the vessel whose light he thought he saw, and so ran straight on the rocks, as the wreckers meant him to do.²

I was taken aback. Was my faithful horse actually an accomplice to murder? Were my unfortunate wanderers really vicious criminals? I learned what many of you probably know, that wrecking was a common practice in many coastal areas of the British Isles well into the eighteenth century. Associated most frequently with Cornwall, looting of wrecked vessels was also an important source of income for communities in the north and, indeed, 'the Highlanders and Islanders of Scotland were enthusiastic wreckers.'³ And while wrecked vessels were considered a godsend and their cargo public property, the use of lights and lanterns to intentionally cause shipwrecks was deemed a grave sin. A slide series called *The Wreckers: A Temperance Story* even associated the bad deeds of wreckers past with the tricks of publicans luring their prey to drink in the big cities:

*But where life's currents the swiftest flow,
'Mid the city's rush and roar,
At the corners of the crowded streets
The wreckers have laid their snare,
Shining both ways with a direful blaze,
They have kindled their false lights there.⁴*

Now I had a better idea of what the slide depicted but what was it doing in a set based on *The Pilgrim's Progress*? A full-text search of Bunyan's allegorical tale of Christian finding his way from 'Destruction' to the 'Celestial City' returned no mentions of either wrecking or wreckers.⁵ Most other slides from the set appeared to be based on book illustrations of *The Pilgrim's Progress* or other biblical tales with the artists listed in parentheses (eg Doré, Copping, Dubufe).⁶ The Newton catalogue attributed 'The Wreckers' to a 'Burton' and revealed that the same image was used in another set from their Lantern Services series called *The Prince of Darkness*.

I quickly discovered that there was a surprisingly large number of famous British 'Burtons' listed in Wikipedia and the Getty Union List of Artist Names but none of them seems to have painted a scene called 'The Wreckers'. The most likely candidate was a Scottish painter called William Paton Burton (1828–83), who showed his watercolour landscapes in exhibitions at London's Royal Academy. Burton also occasionally worked as a black-and-white illustrator for collections of English poems. I found several of his sketches, engraved by the famous Brothers Dalziel, in the Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration (<https://www.dmvi.org.uk>), another wonderful online resource. Their strong contrasts and shadows are somewhat reminiscent of the style of the slide image (Fig. 3).⁷

Alas, the original wreckers remain illusive. So until I am presented with (or find) an original painting or engraving and the associated reading, to me my first slide will always show a horse shining a guiding light for hikers walking in the fields on a stormy night, a windmill barely visible in the background.



1. That magic moment



2. 'The Wreckers' in more detail

NOTES

1. Newton & Co's catalogue of lantern slides of 1912 directed customers to note their new address (37 King Street, Covent Garden), so the slide was most likely bound before they moved production to their new premises.
2. Rev. G. R. Balleine, *Opportunity*, Lantern Services, Volume IV, Newton & Co., London, p. 19. MLS Slide Readings Library Item No. 92346. For the slide set *Opportunity* see Lucerna <https://www.slides.uni-trier.de/set/index.php?id=3002754>.
3. Bella Bathurst, *The Lighthouse Stevensons: the extraordinary story of the building of the Scottish lighthouses by the ancestors of Robert Louis Stevenson*, G. K. Hall & Co., Thorndike, Maine, 2000, p. 73.
4. MLS Slide Readings Library, Item No. 92211, p. 57.
5. The image was most probably allegorical, the false light of the wreckers symbolising Christian's distraction from the right path by false promises.
6. I could trace a number of illustrations by Harold Copping to an edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* published by the Religious Tract Society in 1906. The website Open Library currently lists 340 different editions of Bunyan's work, many of them available online as digital copies (https://openlibrary.org/works/OL107195W/Pilgrim%27s_progress).
7. William Paton Burton, 'The Way to the Chapter House', *English Sacred Poetry*, Routledge & Co., London, 1862, p. 297. Digital image courtesy of Cardiff University (DMVI).

3. William Paton Burton illustration

