

SPRING MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

SWEDENBORG SOCIETY, LONDON

Saturday 28 April 2018

This was a very special meeting of the Magic Lantern Society. A total of 73 members and at least a dozen guests, mainly family, gathered to remember **Dr Mervyn Heard** and **Dick Balzer**, with the various presenters paying their own tributes through shows, recordings and memories. For many there, these two giants of the magic lantern world were the source of their own passion for the magic lantern, whether performing, collecting or researching.

Following an introduction from **Jeremy Brooker**, **Lester Smith** picked two highlights from his long association with Mervyn. The first was raising ghosts for the 'Smoke, Fire, Ghost and Spirit' Convention of 2001. Together they tried creating a 'screen' of frankincense and other vapours without successfully projecting an image and concluded a disco-style oil smoke machine was the only answer. At the Convention, Mervyn's blacked-out 'den' included a tomb, altar, human skull, mystic



symbols on the floor and a notice on the window saying "Smoke Under Control". Using suitable incantations, Mervyn – dressed in wizard outfit with staff – opened the tomb which emitted a cloud of smoke and the lantern concealed within projected a ghostly image using mirrors. Altogether an unforgettable experience. The second highlight was Mervyn's excellent research on the popular 'long' slide *Running away with the Monument* (see *TML* 10, March 2017, p.5). This had long baffled fellow researchers, including Lester, until Mervyn found a nonsense song of 1683 and links to the mischievous Daniel Defoe.

Next Jeremy recalled the US and Canada Convention of 2016 (see *TML* 9, p.13) when only Dick and he followed the theme of the event –

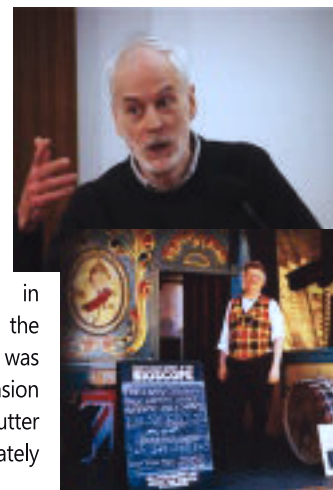


Plantations, Wars, the Mississippi River and All That Jazz – Dick confronting the offensive nature of many Victorian images head on with righteous indignation ... but none of the slides because he had left them at home. Jeremy showed his set *The Fugitive Slave* as a tribute. Set in the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia/North Carolina it unusually features a black slave as hero

and white overseer as villain. Having defended his girlfriend, our hero escapes to the swamp, is shot by the overseer but survives and is joined by his love. The story is resolved in the final slide with the lovers escaping by boat and the overseer being eaten by an alligator. The slides were exquisitely painted, particularly the Rousseau-like foliage – the handiwork of Francis Frederick Theophilus Weeks who was not, alas, the sort of loveable rogue that Mervyn was so brilliant at uncovering. After gaining his break as an artist designing scenery and posters for Lusby's Summer and Winter Palace in the Mile End Road, he designed the masthead for the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal* and claimed to have designed 7000 lantern slides. As a convicted bigamist and rapist he served time in Dartmoor Prison but found redemption through the Church Army – major producers of magic lantern slides.

Stephen Herbert first remembered John and Elizabeth Horton (see *TML* 14, March 2018, p.13), recalling their enthusiasm for religious slides but finding out that John once worked at Paul Raymond's Revue

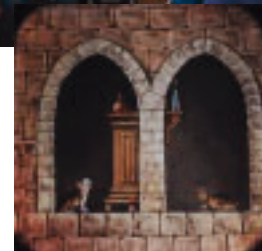
Bar. He operated the 'follow spot' with increasing difficulty as he tried to avoid looking at what he was illuminating on stage as the shows became more and more daring! Stephen then talked about Dick and the frisson of anticipation that ran through any gathering when word spread "Dick Balzer's here". He also recalled Dick's kindness in giving access to his unique collection, including many pieces that could be found nowhere else in the world. Finally to Mervyn, whose book *Phantasmagoria* Stephen published. He described the show he and Mervyn put on in 1997 at the Hollycombe Victorian Steam Fair in Liphook to mark the centenary of the bioscope. While following Mervyn was challenge enough, on one occasion Stephen's whirling projector shutter helicoptered into the audience, fortunately avoiding any serious injury.



Annet Duller then presented *Mystify & Co*, the story of two rival wizards – Hocus and Pocus – whose antics end up with both downsized (as a cat and tortoise) and unable to reach their antidote. Annet saw Mervyn use this set in a show and was stunned by his performance. When she finally acquired a set, she asked Mervyn for his reading only to discover, of course, that he had made it up himself and adapted it over the years, but sent it to her immediately nevertheless.



Richard Crangle then recalled two men who made us laugh. Mervyn's humour in particular was always intelligent and often based on words – he was exceptionally good at cryptic crosswords. He once revealed to Richard that he had written a play under the name 'Dennis E. Williams' (say quickly and think south USA). At the 1999 *Visual Delights*



Conference in Sheffield Mervyn gave the evening show after a day of academic talks and included the story of the three bears. In the slide, the wall of the three bears' living room features a portrait – one of "the three bears' forebears."

John Townsend remembered 40 years' friendship with both men through magic lanterns and had borrowed a few



of Mervyn's favourite slides to illustrate his unique sense of humour. In a fast-moving show ("express travelling") he showed the tennis party including man carrying rifle (see *The Sunday Illuminant*, 2017 Convention), the 'man-eatin tiger (hadmission tuppence)' sideshow with customers attacking the proprietor as they were disappointed by the lack of a man 'eatin a tiger', the curious tale of *The Yorkshireman and the Irish Ghost* and, with a nod to the trans-Atlantic connections,



John's express tour



Sergi entertains



Reverend Parson's pot

How Jones Became a Mason featuring initiation rites that included riding a goat, climbing a greasy pole and sitting on a red-hot gridiron.

After lunch, **Sergi Buka** entertained and amazed us with some close-up magic tricks. Despite seeing it projected larger than life on the big screen we had no inkling of how the cards changed in front of our eyes or the rope trick was done – even with a willing volunteer at hand.

Then Mrs Zenobia Haskin-Davies (aka **Juliette Harcourt**, left) took

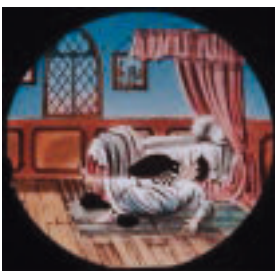


to the lantern and revealed Mervyn's Achilles heel – cucumber – a secret she discovered after meeting him at MOMI in the early 1990s and singing in his shows. She duly sang about "a little bit of cu-cum-ber" with an eclectic mix of slides including a skeleton, a group dressed as vegetables (possibly cucumbers) and some slipping slides.

Next came a rousing rendition of *Heart of Oak* with a magnificent oak tree slide that became festooned with sailors and flags of St George. *Blow the Wind Southerly* was illustrated with sea images including a disastrous whaling venture and a lighthouse dissolving view. In the style of *Another Man's Wig*, she related the tragic tale of Constance and her ill-advised marriage to a cad who wore checks. Mrs Haskin-Davies then signed off with a beautiful interpretation of *For Auld Lang Syne*.

George Auckland showed *Another Man's Wig* (see TML 14, p.4) with Mervyn's own voice-over. Professional film-makers usually turned to Mervyn for anything connected with magic lanterns and George showed some clips from his many broadcast appearances.

Nick Hiley talked about the delight of knowing Mervyn and his philosophy that a lantern show is whatever you want to make it. Nick's show was one he felt Mervyn would have liked, with elements of the bizarre. It focused on the Hospice of St Bernard, famous for its dogs rescuing travellers in distress, possibly with barrels of brandy (sadly evidence is lacking on this). First we met Spot (a lever slide) rescuing an unwary climber up to his neck in snow. "Hi Spot" the audience cried – and that was the high spot of the show (a Mervyn special).



THE MAGIC LANTERN is edited, designed and produced by Mary Ann Auckland and Gwen Sebus, assisted by Richard Crangle.

Letters to the Editors can be sent by email to: editor@magiclantern.org.uk

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Printed by Stormpress, Exeter – www.stormpress.co.uk

Published by:

The Magic Lantern Society
17 Dean Street
Exeter EX2 4HH, UK

www.magiclantern.org.uk

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ISSN 2057-3723



dry. Nick kindly supplied an appropriate motto "Flee from the wrath to come" (St Luke 3:7)!

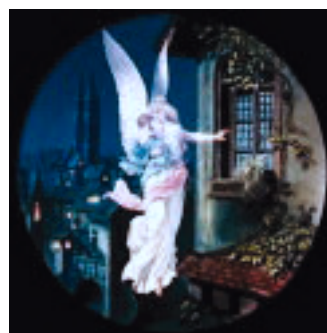
Gordon Casbeard, filling in for Keith Utteridge who was unable to come, recalled Mervyn's wonderful rendition of *How Bill Adams won the Battle of Waterloo*, correcting Gordon's previously held belief that Nelson was at Trafalgar not Waterloo. His tribute to Mervyn was a rare set of six slides – *The Unlucky Present*. This concerned the Reverend Parsons who was a "scoffer and collector", never turning down a free meal or cheap item. On visiting a widow he emerges with her cast-iron cooking pot, having helped to consume its contents. En route the pot becomes stuck on his head and the local blacksmith removes it with a sledgehammer. So ended the "potted history" of the parson who "lost the plot regarding his pot".

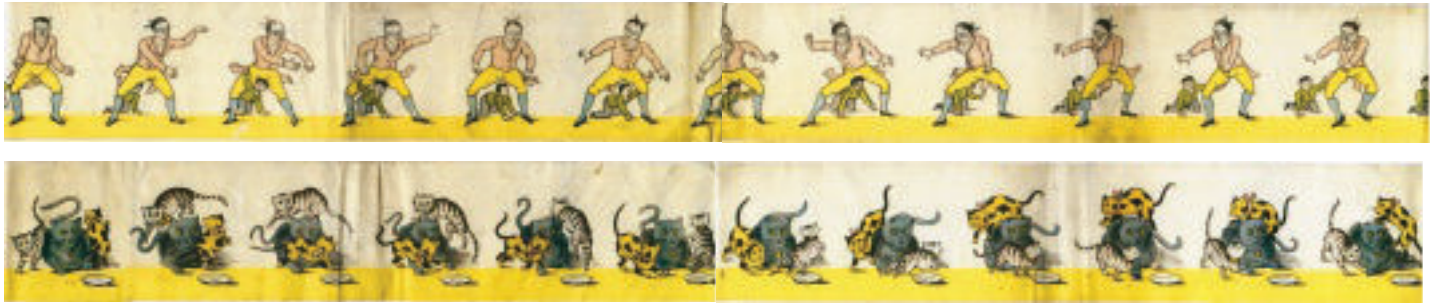
Next **Monique Wezenberg** presented *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark* using 13 unusual slides, each introduced by a different song from the 1970s as the characters slowly emerged from the dark. The story was told by 12 different 'volunteers' from the audience – with no forewarning or rehearsal they did a great job. This turned out to be a modern 'dating in the dark' tale featuring violin violence, a cookie seller, a dancing 'king' and an interesting interpretation of "you sexy thing". Monique brought the story to a close with a slide featuring all the individual characters and told of their subsequent fates.



"I believe in miracles ..."

A video directed by Matthew Balzer brought back many memories of his father Dick and his long association with the magic lantern on both sides of the Atlantic. The meeting drew to a close with a breathtaking selection of slide sets and special effects from **Martin Gilbert** ably assisted by Monique, each set introduced by a different chromatrope. These included *The Watermill* complete with swan, people crossing the bridge and entering the mill via an opening door, day, moonlit night and winter; *Fire! Fire!* taking us from a busy street scene, through a blazing fire with Fire Brigade in attendance, to black smoky ruins in the moonlight, all accompanied by London ditties; *The Fairy Glen* with fairies of all sizes appearing from every direction; and finally *You raise me up* featuring a feast of caring and spectacular angels including one group going heavenwards diagonally (try that at home!). This was a fitting end to an unforgettable day when affection and respect for Mervyn and Dick shone through at every point, from contributors and audience alike. (See page 11 for more images.)





6. Original Viviscope bands, from Series A. Each band is 11½ inches in circumference and 2¼ inches high (Barnes Archive)

The author is grateful for the co-operation of Helmut Wälde, Stephen Herbert and Lester Smith in the preparation of this article and thankful to Laurent Mannoni of the Cinémathèque française, Paris, for having catalogued the Will Day Collection.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Stephen Herbert, *Industry, Liberty, and a Vision: Wordsworth Donisthorpe's Kinesigraph*, The Projection Box, Hastings, 2017 (for the US patent drawing), p.156 and Wälde Collection for a copy of the UK patent
2. Promotional pamphlet, 4pp, in Wälde Collection
3. Herbert, *Donisthorpe*, p.156
4. *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, February 1897 (my thanks to Stephen Herbert for this reference)
5. See US patent drawing, Herbert, *Donisthorpe*, p.156
6. Paul Spehr, *The Man Who Made Movies: W.K.L.Dickson*, John Libbey, 2008, p.403
7. Promotional pamphlet, 4pp, in Wälde Collection

8. *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, February 1897, quoted in Herbert, *Donisthorpe*, p.156
 9. My thanks to Peter Jewell of the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum for reporting the existence of the Gozo-Malta Viviscope
- These two contemporary works (supplied by Helmut Wälde) also mention the Viviscope:
- *The Scientific American*, 20 June 1896, p.395
 - *Das Buch der Experimente*, from Schweiger/Lerchanfeld. A Hartleben's Verlag, Leipzig, 1900

MLS member David Burder has recreated a viviscope that you can view on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCLyPMSrdko>

MY FIRST SLIDE

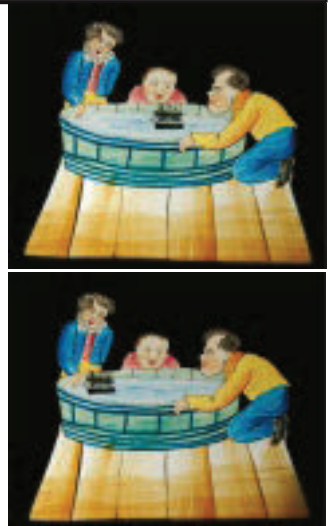
Aileen Butler



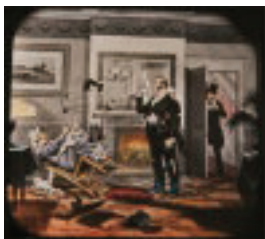
I grew up with a family magic lantern which had been passed down from my grandfather. My first slides had been either his or picked up by my father after World War II. A favourite slide was the blacksmith beating the anvil (to the 'da, da, dadada, da' accompaniment of the Volga Boat Song). Another slide showed boys blowing a boat to and fro across a tub of water.

Favourite story sets were *John Gilpin's Ride*, *the Jackdaw of Rheims*, *Tiger and the Tub*, and – a late addition in the 1950s –

Disney's *Three Little Pigs*. There were also favourite children's slides of incredible deep sea fish and early flying machines. My birthday parties as a child always won over others as we finished with a magic lantern show!



MORE IMAGES FROM THE SPRING MEETING (see page 15)



Jones the Mason (above) and The Irish Ghost (rt)



Heart of Oak



The fugitive slave dreaming



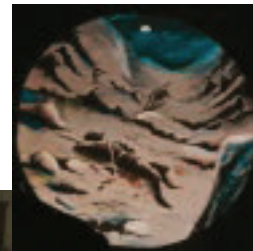
Fire! Fire!



Mervyn and Martin setting up the phantasmagoria den



Monique Wezenberg, John Townsend and Annet Duller



St Bernard rescue (above), Hocus – or Pocus (above rt), Martin Gilbert and Cindy Sughrue (from the Dickens Museum, see p.9) (rt)



Videos of most presentations are available via the Members' Area of the MLS website (www.magiclantern.org.uk/events/meetings-search.php)