

MABOR LIMES

Lindsay Lambert and Andrew Mumford

Earlier this year MLS member **Lindsay Lambert** purchased a box of Mabor Limes on eBay from **Andrew Mumford** in Sandwich, UK. When Lindsay asked about their history, this story emerged.

ANDREW MUMFORD'S STORY

My father Bertie was born in 1908 in London. His father was a simple labourer who ended up having a family of six children. Unlike his siblings, Bertie was always interested in technical things. His father apprenticed him to a carpenter but Bertie had other ideas and wanted to become an engineer.

As a child, life was very hard for his family. To supplement his income, my grandfather would often swim in the Thames to recover the bodies of suicides – which he apparently found by floating out a loaf of bread containing quicksilver that would come to rest over a submerged body. Apparently the Council on the far side of the river paid a higher bounty, so he would drag them across the Thames to maximise his income! There was no social security in those days, so if you became out of work, you starved, and many people took the quicker way out. Nevertheless, my grandmother was extremely house-proud, and the children were always lined up and inspected for cleanliness before being allowed out.

Against this background, my father learned to supplement his own income by doing odd jobs, such as paper hanging, and as few houses in those days had electricity, collecting and charging Leclanché cells used for the new-fangled doorbells. He later went into house-wiring in his spare time – electrical qualifications in those days were unheard of. He also made and sold crystal and 'cat's whisker' radio sets, as radio had just been developed and everyone wanted to listen to the first broadcasts from Crystal Palace.

Bertie also found an interest in photography which continued throughout his life. I remember as a boy being shown how to develop film and prints in the darkroom, and all matters camera-related. That probably started because of his interest in magic lantern shows. He set these up as a boy to entertain his family and neighbours – and also for a few extra pennies! The Mabor Limes came from his possessions. I can only think they dated back to that time and I suppose he had kept them as a reminder of his own days 'in the limelight'.



Bertie Mumford (on the right) as a child, with two of his brothers, when he gave magic lantern shows



Bertie Mumford in uniform during WWII

After leaving school at a very early age (higher education was an unaffordable luxury in those days), Bertie moved on from carpentry to become an instrument maker and then put himself through night school, eventually qualifying as an electrical and mechanical engineer. In his twenties, he also developed an interest in the military, having lived through WWI and, as a boy, remembering the sight of a Zeppelin bombing London. He joined the Territorial Army (voluntary army reserve) and was a Staff Sergeant in the Royal Engineers when WWII broke out. He volunteered immediately, realising that conscription was inevitable and as a volunteer he would then be able to retain his rank and cap badge!

During that conflict, his engineering skills were put to good use in special weapons development – some of their descendants are still in use today – and he eventually landed in Normandy on D-Day, only to be recalled a few weeks later to be commissioned.

He had a very interesting life, spanning the first flight of the Wright Brothers through to the moon landings. He (and I) travelled the world to various British outposts, as he became a civil engineer attached to the Army after being demobbed (demobilised). Until his death at the age of 90, he was always interested in learning about new technology, and was well into computing by then. He would have loved the Internet, but that came too late for him.

I am sorry I cannot give you more details of the magic lantern shows he used to put on. It was really only a hobby and way of making some extra money, but I hope I have given you a flavour of what life was like for some in those days.



A box of Mabor Limes. On the lid it says: "Unaffected by damp ... hard – durable – brilliant"

LINDSAY LAMBERT ON LIMELIGHT

I have published on the subject, assembled a representative collection of limelight jets and related equipment over the years, and demonstrate the illuminant. In limelight, a cylinder of lime (burnt limestone or calcium oxide) is heated to incandescence, generally with a flame of combined oxygen and hydrogen. The brilliancy of the light far exceeded anything previously known. The principle, discovered in about 1802, was first put to practical use by Lieutenant Thomas Drummond of the Royal Engineers in an 1825 survey of Ireland for making distant stations visible at night.

Calcium oxide limes must be kept in sealed containers until use as they absorb moisture from the air, convert to calcium hydroxide and crumble. Mabor Limes were alternatives made of magnesium oxide, which work almost as well and do not fall to bits. They were advertised as "the lime that laughs at moisture." The best limestone limes came from the Nottingham area of the UK. Years ago, I wrote to a few refractory firms there to see if any had their roots in limelight cylinder making. None did, but the plant chemist of one surprised me with a box of new magnesium oxide cylinders that he had made up. These are the ones I use for my demonstrations.

The main use of limelight was in the theatre, magic lantern and cinema projectors before mains electricity became readily available. For my magic lantern shows nowadays I use a 150 Watt halogen lamp and will soon move to LED – no limelight – so I will keep the Mabor Limes as a treasured artefact.