

THE JOY OF LISTS

Lantern and Slide Catalogues and How to Approach Them

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Issuing catalogues, in one form or another, is one of the most fundamental elements of retail business practice – how else do your potential customers find out what delights you have available, just waiting to improve their lives?

As dealing in lanterns and slides became a more established trade in Europe and the USA over the second half of the 19th century, naturally many of its businesses produced catalogues of their wares. These varied greatly in format, depending on the type and scale of the operation – a local showperson might issue a single printed (or even handwritten) sheet listing the entertainments they could offer, while a major wholesale dealer or retailer might produce a bound volume running to several hundred pages listing many thousands of slides, lanterns and accessories. The frequency of publication also varied – a small trader might only ever have issued one list, but the more established commercial manufacturers and retailers added new stock regularly enough to justify an annual edition.

Although at this level catalogues are quite simple texts ('just' a list of items, perhaps with a few illustrations to make things clearer or more attractive), they were never easy or cheap things to publish. Certainly creating an annual publication of several hundred pages must have been a major effort and expense. As a result historic catalogues tended not to be very lavish publications, printed on cheap paper and with as much re-use as possible of pre-set text blocks from previous issues. After all they were, almost by definition, only supposed to last for a limited time until the next issue appeared to take their place and the previous one went in the dustbin.

Lantern and slide dealers' catalogues are perhaps not always the most exciting of texts, at least at first sight and to the general reader. They tend to be functional – the information they contain may be

interesting to a specialist but, apart from sometimes attractive cover designs, they are not always aesthetically beautiful in their own right (Figs 1-4). So unless you have a specific interest in the items they describe (as a possible purchaser or, in latter days, a collector or researcher), catalogues can look a bit like 'boring' lists of numbers and titles that don't reproduce the visual or tactile delights that we know the items themselves can be. However they have a hidden value and even a charm all of their own, at least for those of us who like seeing the chaotic world described and categorised in an orderly fashion.

In the lantern world many collectors and researchers do recognise the importance of these humble texts. A browse back through the earlier newsletters and journals of a body like the MLS reveals a regular stream of requests for information about who made a particular slide set, when items were produced, whether 'item A' is really the same as 'item B', and other concerns of the inquisitive collector. Contemporary catalogues have always been one of the best ways of digging into that type of information and they were much sought by collectors in the earlier years of the revival of lantern interest from the 1960s to the 1990s. They are particularly valuable for dating slides and hardware – fairly obviously, if a catalogue can be reliably assigned to a particular year, then everything mentioned within it must have existed at or before that time – and (with a few caveats about who 'really' made the items that appear in a dealer's catalogue) they are also helpful for identifying the manufacturers and provenance of the often anonymous items in modern collections.

USING CATALOGUES FOR RESEARCH

The number and range of catalogues still in circulation confirms what most of us already know, namely that the high point of the lantern as an organised trade in economically developed countries was between roughly 1880 and 1914. Catalogues from before that period are rare, and also uncommon from after the First World War. Where it has been possible to date them, catalogues from the 1890s and 1900s are probably found more often than others from that general period. If there is one single year that seems to be better represented than any



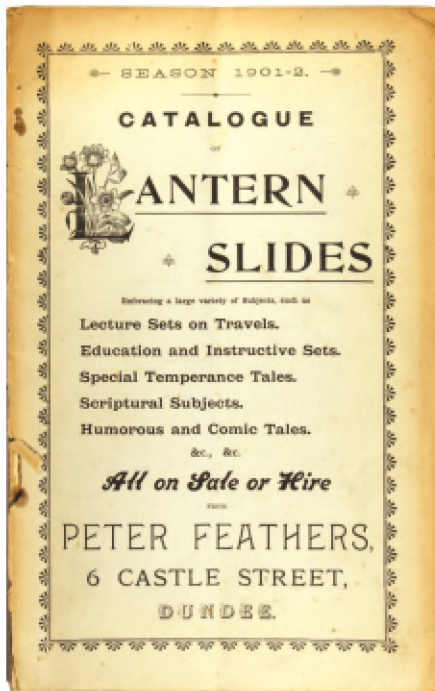
1. North of England Temperance League, Newcastle upon Tyne, Hire List: Season 1906-7, catalogue of slides and equipment (Lucerna 4010299)



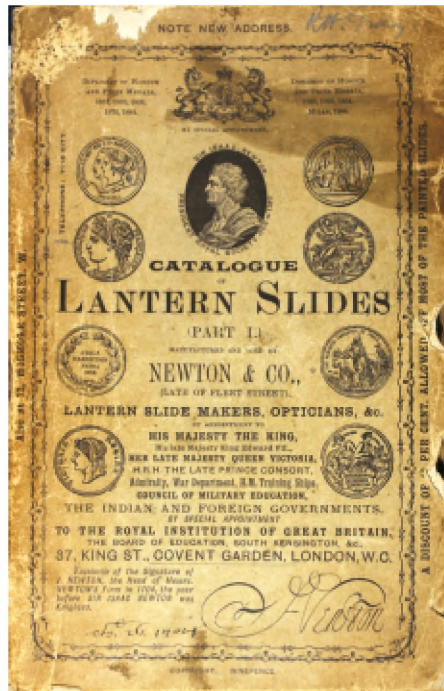
2. Union Lantern Bureau, Liverpool (successor to Archer & Sons), Service Handbook of High Grade Optical Lantern Slides, late 1920s (Lucerna 4010432)



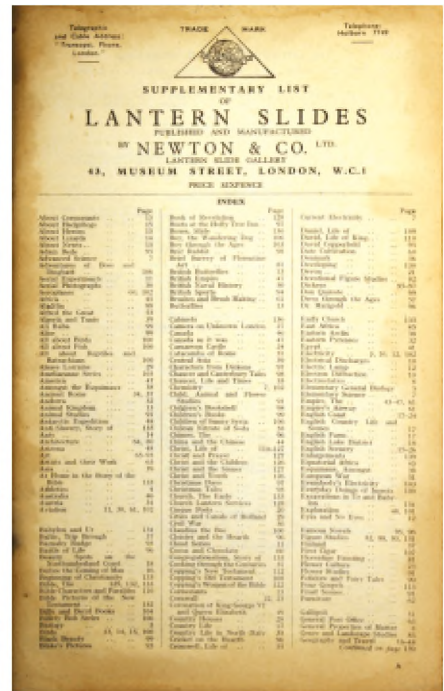
3. W.C. Hughes, London, catalogue of lanterns, slides and cinematographs, 1900s (Lucerna 4010482)



4. Peter Feathers, Dundee, Catalogue of Lantern Slides: Season 1901-2 (Lucerna 4010297)



5. Newton & Co., London, Catalogue of Lantern Slides: Part I, 1912 (Lucerna 4009107)



6. Newton & Co., London, Supplementary List of Lantern Slides, 1937 (Lucerna 4009269)

other, it is 1913 – which probably reflects the fact that earlier editions were typically discarded when a new one appeared and, for obvious reasons, not many Autumn 1914 updates to the large dealers' catalogues appeared to replace the 1913 issues. Post-war the process of consolidation of the trade, which had already started in the 1900s, accelerated so that very few British dealers were still issuing slide and hardware catalogues in the 1920s and 1930s – though those who did put out some long and comprehensive lists which are now very useful reference sources.

As is well known, in Britain the 'last man standing' in the British lantern and slide business was the London dealer Newton & Co. and as a result their stock of lanterns and slides was probably the largest ever of any British manufacturer-dealer. Surviving texts suggest that they published catalogues and supplements every few years in the 1890s and 1900s, consolidated in 1912-13 into an enormous two-volume listing of their slide stock (Fig. 5) whose issue coincided with a relocation of the business from their long-time base at 3 Fleet Street to new premises in King Street, Covent Garden. This gigantic list runs to over 830 pages, detailing some 1,300 sets comprising over 70,000 slides.¹ However it was superseded by an even larger edition in the mid-1920s, again roughly coinciding with a move of premises to a 'new lantern slide gallery' in Museum Street, close to the British Museum. This divided Newton's slide stock into subject 'sections' over ten volumes, containing between 50 and 220 pages each and probably totalling around 1,000 pages (not all the volumes are known to survive), and appears to offer an almost complete listing of everything they produced in the previous 30 years.²

Newton are not known to have attempted another full catalogue after this, instead producing substantial 'Supplementary Lists' from time to time – examples are known from around 1930 and from 1937 (Fig. 6). Reading the contents of all these texts together, we can begin to arrive at a rough idea of the full extent of one of the most important (though not always the most exciting, since Newton traded heavily on educational lecture slides) bodies of British slide production, a sample of the whole range of commercial slide sets made over the long high point of the trade.

Just as useful, these later catalogues illustrate how over the years Newton acquired the stock of various other British slide producers as they went out of business: their 1937 *Supplementary List* proudly announces that their list includes the stock of the Diagram Company, York & Son, Frederick Hollyer, Wilson Brothers (successors to G.W. Wilson), P.H. Fincham, Horatio Nelson King and Graystone Bird.³ With some care, then, perusing one dealer's catalogue can begin to unlock some mysteries of the production of various other firms. To take one example, the 1937 Newton supplement identifies and lists most of the production of Graystone Bird, including title lists of all Bird's hundreds of celebrated artistic genre photos.⁴

The real key to unlocking the secrets of slide and lantern catalogues is to compare them with each other. Because the lantern trade was a complicated web of interacting manufacturers, subcontractors, wholesale dealers and retail/hire businesses, it's often unclear who was actually responsible for making any given item or when it first appeared. A single isolated catalogue won't necessarily help with this process, giving as it does a snapshot of the stock of one dealer on one occasion, but by comparing several catalogues we can begin to sketch the patterns behind the trade practices. This is especially true if we can reliably date any of the catalogues: some helpfully give a definite publication date but more usually it's a process of deduction based on dealers' business addresses (as in the Newton examples just discussed) or sometimes whether an item whose date is known appears in a particular catalogue edition. To make progress on that front, we need as large a body of catalogues as possible, with easy ways of indexing, searching and reading their contents. It's a very complicated jigsaw puzzle with lots of pieces missing but, with care and imagination and access to the resources, we could begin to make a start.

Catalogues can also reveal some aspects of the way different participants in the trade interacted with each other. At a simple level, if a slide set definitely known to be made by 'Maker X' is found in the catalogue of 'Dealer Y', then we can say that the two businesses had some ongoing commercial relationship that might shed light on other items they made and sold. In a few cases, we can put more detail on

this principle: for example, the Riley Brothers *Illustrated Catalogue de Luxe* and *The 'Wrench' Illustrated Catalogue of Optical Lanterns and Accessories [...]* (Fig. 7) are identical over 320 pages, except for different title pages and a running header on all pages of the Wrench version, which are slightly taller as a result.⁵ So it's reasonable to conclude that (at least in 1908-09 – the date foil-blocked onto the spine of the Wrench version) most of what were sold as 'Riley' lanterns were actually bought-in at a wholesale rate from Wrench, possibly 're-badged', and then sold on to purchasers. This pattern was widespread across the slide and lantern hardware businesses and (as still happens now – compare the 'own brand' produce available today in different supermarket chains) so much a part of business practice that it was probably unremarkable to the people and companies involved. If the end consumer knew or cared whether they were buying a Riley lantern or a Wrench lantern is perhaps a more interesting question, though it may be one that can never be answered for certain.

MAKING CATALOGUES MORE AVAILABLE

Along with examining the actual lantern and slide artefacts themselves, then, manufacturers' and dealers' catalogues give us one of the most powerful tools for beginning to unravel the tangled threads of the trade and its practices. But the difficulty has always been how to find them: given their ephemeral and sometimes visually unexciting nature, it's perhaps a small miracle that any of these fragile texts survive at all. When they do survive in public or private collections, it's not always easy to find where they are, or to gain access to them and the information they contain: few relevant collections publish their own catalogues of holdings and fewer still are in a position to make the *contents* of the texts they hold available more generally. In recent years copies of catalogues have begun to appear on web resources like the Media History Digital Library (including a rich selection of continental European catalogues arising from the *Million Pictures* project), but there are still many more to find.⁶

So imagine my delight when, out of the blue during the first British 'lockdown' of 2020, a large collection of around 60 slide and hardware catalogues was drawn to my attention, with the offer to make it available for copying to share with MLS members. This remarkably generous and public-spirited offer came from Martin Gilbert who among many other fine achievements over the years has been quietly acquiring catalogues and other similar texts, including a good selection of the contemporary lantern manuals which will be familiar to many modern collectors and researchers.

The Martin Gilbert collection of catalogues includes too many interesting and rare items to list individually here, though it will be appearing soon on a website near you. For a researcher like your present correspondent, with an interest in and a bit of background knowledge of the organised British lantern and slide trades, it's an absolute treasure trove. Even a random wander through a few of the texts begins to open up connections and answer research questions that have nagged at me for years.

Of course the catalogues themselves are too fragile to circulate the originals: any great amount of wear and tear on their thin brittle pages or tired spines will quickly reduce them to piles of random scraps of paper. Copying into a digital format is the only solution for widespread sharing so, instead of the new baking or handicraft skills that everybody else seemed to take up to get through being imprisoned by 'The Virus', in the spring of 2020 I got to work with my trusty SLR camera and copy stand. The Martin Gilbert Collection catalogues contain a total of over 11,700 pages (yes, I did count them) so, since saving a few seconds on each page was worth doing, I chose to photograph rather than scan them, which also gives less wear to the texts themselves. Having created digital images of all the pages, those are then processed using image software to create files for



(a)

(b)



(c)

(d)

7. Spot the difference! Title pages and sample page from Riley (a,b) and Wrench (c,d) hardware catalogues, 1908 (Lucerna 4010499 and 4010500)

each catalogue in the international standard PDF format. Records for the catalogues are added to the Lucerna database, and the resulting data and image files transferred to the Magic Lantern Society website.

From the publication of this issue of *TML*, MLS members have access to these rare and informative texts free of charge, as a benefit of Society membership. The initial selection covers just over one-third of the Martin Gilbert Collection, with more to be added as time allows copying and processing. The copies can be found online at the Society website in the 'Resources' section (Fig. 8). Anyone can search and browse the contents of the library but to see inside the catalogues themselves (including the ability to search for individual words within each catalogue) you have to sign in using your MLS username and password. Members' access also allows you to download copies of the catalogues to your own computer or other device, subject to some basic terms and conditions.

And yes, since you ask, we do want to add to the collection. If you have catalogues in your collection which you're prepared to share with other members, especially if you can produce good-quality copies yourself, please do get in touch via the 'Contact us' links in the relevant pages of the Society website. It takes time and care to produce good-quality copies, of course, but it only has to be done once for each catalogue and the new opportunities opened up for understanding more are worth the effort. Even the least exciting looking items still have something to tell us.

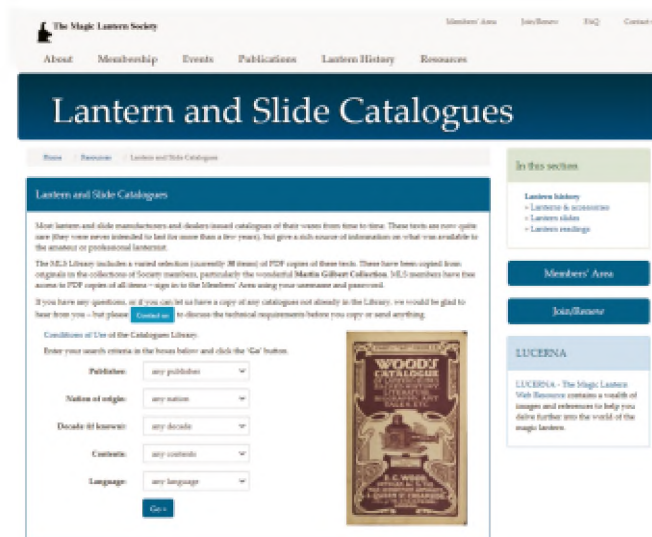
NOTES

All images show items from the Martin Gilbert Collection, photographed by Richard Crangle.

All the catalogues referred to in this article are now available as word-searchable PDF files at the Magic Lantern Society website, www.magiclantern.org.uk/catalogues. An MLS member's username and password are needed for browsing and downloading the catalogue contents.

Mentions of Lucerna in the notes refer to the Lucerna Magic Lantern Web Resource, lucerna.exeter.ac.uk – use the 'Search' function there to find individual items by their ID numbers given below.

1. *Catalogue of Lantern Slides: Part I and Part II*, Newton & Co., London, 1912-1913 (Lucerna 4009107 and 4009106 respectively). The totals of sets and slides here are approximate because some sets appear in both volumes.
2. *Newton's Lantern Slide Catalogue: Section 1 to Section 10*, Newton & Co., London, c.1926 (Lucerna 4009662 for Section 1, from which the other sections are linked). Examples of some sections have been seen with the King Street address and others with Museum Street – the company moved between the October 1925 and April 1926 issues of the London telephone directory. The highest page number in the final section is 1,244, but the



8. Magic Lantern Society website, 'Lantern and Slide Catalogues' search page (www.magiclantern.org.uk/catalogues).

- numbering sequence was not continuous, with gaps between the sections probably intended to allow for stock expansion.
3. *Supplementary List of Lantern Slides*, Newton & Co., London, 1937, pp.137-138 (Lucerna 4009269). The list of incorporated businesses (some of them were artistic photographers rather than mainstream slide producers) is part of a promotional item at the end of the catalogue, advertising the Newtonian Illustrated-Press Service, a picture library aimed at publishers of magazines, books and newspapers. Most of the organisations mentioned here have basic records in Lucerna.
 4. The listings of Graystone Bird's slides in the 1937 Newton *Supplementary List* have proved invaluable for a first attempt at a full (or as near as possible) cataloguing of Bird's output of over 5,000 individual slides. See Lucerna item 1000405 and follow the 'Slide manufacture' link.
 5. The Riley version of the catalogue (Lucerna 4010499) includes a 16-page 'Abbreviated Catalogue' section (numbered i to xvi), listing items under established Riley trade names like 'Praestantia', 'Climax' and 'Rilford', bound in front of a 320-page reprint of the Wrench version (Lucerna 4010500). The first section includes a note that "some of the goods listed [...] are referred to again in later pages, but others appear in this section only". The relationship between Riley and Wrench is therefore slightly more complex than meets the eye but this recycling of catalogue content shows that by the late 1900s the British lantern hardware trade was dominated by large London-based companies like Wrench. Roughly the first 200 pages of the Wrench catalogue cover lanterns of every type, there are about 10 pages of slides and 30 of lantern accessories, and the remaining 80 pages deal with cinematograph hardware.
 6. See mediahistoryproject.org/magiclantern/index.html for the MHDL collection.