

SUMMER MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

ROBOROUGH STUDIOS, UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Saturday 24 July 2021



MLS Chair, Jeremy Brooker

Hoorah! At last 30 or so well-distanced members were able to meet in person to enjoy 'live' magic lantern shows and presentations. While others in south-west England were making for the beach, we knew, as the scorching weather (for the UK) ended, the best place to head for was the spacious and versatile Roborough Studios. For those not able to join us the whole programme was livestreamed – a first for the MLS.

Chair **Jeremy Brooker** welcomed everyone at the meeting and at home. He particularly thanked **Richard Crangle** and **Martin Gilbert** for their extraordinary work in putting on the meeting, and **Jon Primrose**, **Frog Morris** and **George Auckland** for organising the livestream.

The first presentation was by Exeter University professors **John Plunkett** and **Joe Kember** who discussed their project on projected shows in the south west – the world outside London – focussing on the range of venues and the impact of changing cultural practices. John started with a popular science lecture from 1835 in Teignmouth that concluded with 'new apparatus' projecting a 'dissolvent diorama' of subjects including Stonehenge. The short-lived Bristol and Clifton Polytechnic Institution, based on the London Royal Polytechnic, offered 'oxy-hydrogen microscope dissolving views' in 1842. Outdoor public projection examples included political election results and advertising (with a resulting 'media battle'). Joe then discussed their analysis of newspaper-reported shows in Exeter between 1880 and 1914, divided into categories of educational, religious, travel and children's. These showed a huge growth in the late 1880s, largely sustained throughout the rest of the period, in particular the educational category that was helped by the start of university extension lectures in 1888.



The Teignmouth poster, 1835

Next **Richard Crangle** and **Martin Gilbert** brought us the story of the catastrophic fire at the Theatre Royal, Exeter, in September 1887 using Martin's set of slides by **W.C. Hughes** on the subject, as featured on page 1 of this edition of *TML*. An extract from the dubious pen of **William 'The Great' McGonagall** (we were spared most of his epic poem on the disaster) set the scene. Then, while **Richard** read through the step-by-step instructions in *The Art of Projection and Complete Magic Lantern Manual*, **Martin** projected the slides on screen, expertly manipulating the dissolving smoke and fire effects as well as theatre interiors and exteriors. Finally we were treated to the whole sequence with music and no directions.

After lunch **Richard Crangle**, in his best **Stanley Holloway** accent, gave us a wonderful rendition of **Marriott Edgar's** *The Lion and Albert* illustrated with an eclectic selection of appropriate



Martin Gilbert with his triunial



Ine van Dooren, Ester Roosmaa (left) and the Brookers with the cream teas



From **Richard Crangle's** *The Lion and Albert* – an animal at the zoo (left) and 'Mr and Mrs Ramsbottom and young Albert' (modelled by Mr and Mrs Crangle and son John) (right)

Jeremy and Carolyn Brooker's presentation

and more creatively interpreted slides, plus some interventions by the 'Amalgamated Exeter and East Devon Gentlefolk's Union for the Welfare of Animalkind'. Next Carolyn and Jeremy Brooker took us to the Isle of Wight *With Uncle Fred at the Seaside*, a charming coloured set mainly of children on holiday, probably privately produced in the 1930s. The slides had an Edwardian feel in subject matter but the reading, with borrowed religious texts, was not quite in



Mr Brodie's slide, presented by Janet Tamblin

keeping with the summer mood (we were spared it!). In an

unexpected addition to the programme Janet Tamblin offered another informal tribute to Mike Simkin (see p. 8); some beautiful slides from a collection originally put together by Mr Frederick Brodie, a harbour master (and inveterate collector) at Portsmouth in the 19th century. He bought the slides directly from the best makers of the day, from around 1850 until the 1880s. Mike Simkin had researched Brodie's life and once owned the rest of the collection, mostly scientific subjects. Janet showed us the wonders of the world from the Arctic to China via Istanbul, ancient ruins in Egypt and even a volcano, finishing at home with the Crystal Palace and a few lighter topics.

Before the meeting began and during lunch we were able to visit the wonderful Bill Douglas Cinema Museum opposite the studios. This houses the Bill Douglas and Peter Jewell Collection that includes magic lanterns, slides, panoramas, peep shows and many other optical wonders. Well worth a visit. Next in the programme were three related film extracts. In the first Peter Jewell discussed the making of Bill Douglas' 1987 film *Comrades* about the Tolpuddle Martyrs (1830s) on which Peter was the script editor. The character of the magic lanternist (played by Alex Norton) introduces the film and re-appears in many guises, each with different forms of optical entertainment such as a peep show, silhouettes and diorama. Alex Norton himself appeared in the second extract talking about his part in *Comrades*, along with the praxinoscope and thaumatropes, and other people involved in the film including Mike Simkin, its magic lantern consultant, who described filming the sequence with the dissolving view of the ship struck by lightning. The third film was an interview with Mike who talked about his magic lantern story, his collection, giving shows with his wife Tre Simkin and the close association of Birmingham with the magic lantern.



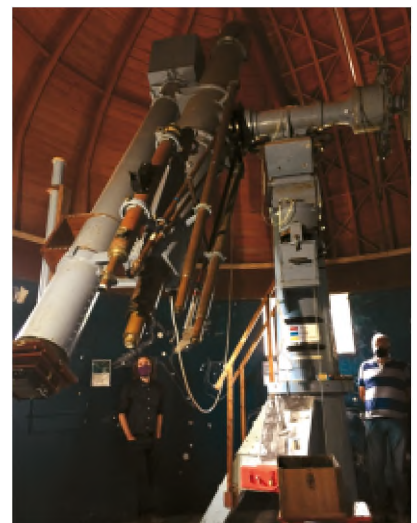
The Muckle Flugga Magic Lantern Company

sets – *A Child's Vision of Christmas* (7 slides), *The Mandarin's Dinner Party* (6 slides) and *Virginia Water* (10 slides including extra effects, ducks, etc.) – he first projected each set slide by slide and then in combination with music. This was a fascinating insight into the pinpoint alignments required, the brilliant effects created often from relatively simple artwork such as rain and day-to-night by filter – and the need for several hands at once. Far from diminishing the magic of these sets, their 'dissection' increased our awe and the magic of the lanternist projecting them.

The Saturday programme closed with the long-awaited return of the Muckle Flugga Magic Lantern Company (Vanessa Sparrow) presenting a thoroughly entertaining show that promised, and delivered, 'magic, music, marvel, mirth and murder'. With live pianist and violinist, life model stories (a 21st-century take), singalongs (with anti-bac spray and some increasingly revealing slides) plus a few more traditional slides, what a great treat this was.

And for something completely different ... the following day a select group of members visited the Norman Lockyer Observatory near Sidmouth. As well as a fascinating tour around their historic telescopes – and more modern equipment – MLS member John Chuter showed us some of the magic lantern slides in their collection. Well done everyone involved for a hugely appreciated and worthwhile MLS meeting!

After an excellent Devon cream tea served by Ester Roosmaa and Ine van Dooren, Martin Gilbert unmasked some of the secrets of complex dissolving views. Using three rare



The MLS group at the Norman Lockyer Observatory near Sidmouth (below) and looking at one of their vintage telescopes (above)

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

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

Material from this publication may not be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the Editors.

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

© 2021 The Magic Lantern Society

ISSN 2057-3723

