

# PHOTOGRAPHIC SLIDES SHOWING VICTORIAN SOCIAL HISTORY

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Victorian photography plays an important role in a better understanding of British social history. Its powerful visual impact helps the viewer to become immersed within the subject material. There are lots of written archival sources, but nothing makes the evidence clearer than a picture, and photography gets closer to the realities of life than any other medium.

Over more than 50 years, I put together a collection of more than 850 photographic lantern slides showing aspects of this social history. I tried primarily to choose images that gave an insight into the lives of working men, women and children as they carried out their ordinary daily tasks during the last quarter of the Victorian period.

It was relatively easy to find works by some of the earliest British photographers who specialised in documentary subjects, such as George Washington Wilson, Francis Frith and James Valentine. They are well represented in the collection. As the 'masters of Victorian photography' it is not surprising that their work was widely sold, with the result that much of it survives today in archives and private collections.

However it is much harder to find photographs that were not published commercially, yet may be just as important in the social subjects they show. Privately-made slides were often unique, and more or less by definition they left few traces like catalogue entries. Unless by chance there are written records – like local newspaper reports of presenters using slides to illustrate their lectures in town halls and similar venues – it is difficult to know where such slides were shown, or the types of audience who saw them.

Over the years, whenever possible, I tried to acquire small but complete collections from unknown photographers as well as the 'big names', and in my view it is these that provide depth and variety to the collection as a whole. In this article I will touch on a few examples of these groups of images.

## Doctor Barnardo's Homes

In a previous article (*TML* 23, June 2020), I mentioned slides distributed by Dr Thomas Barnardo (1845–1905), a relatively well-known source which includes some of the earliest photographs taken for charity fundraising. The Barnardo slides give strong visual impressions of how starving urchins could be rescued from the slums and their lives turned around once they were taken to a Barnardo Home. Barnardo employed Thomas Barnes, a well-known east London photographer, to take a

series of 'before' and 'after' photographs (Figs 1 and 2). To create the 'before' images, Barnes smeared mud on the children and tore their clothes. The same children were then shown in 'after' photographs at the Home, looking clean and well-fed. The slides are known to have been projected to audiences of prospective donors at fund-raising ventures in places as grand as the Royal Albert Hall.

However these photos gave rise to an 1877 legal case, on the grounds that the photos were dishonest and tended to undermine the better feelings of the children. Barnardo was disappointed that the Court of Arbitration determined that the photos did in fact use excessive licence, though in spite of this reprimand the court also said that Barnardo's Homes were still 'real and valuable charities.' This case was important in the history of photography, as it challenged the idea that photographs were always 'authentic' representations of 'the truth'.

## The 'Pit Brow Lasses'

Especially in our world of digital and AI editing techniques, it can be difficult to judge what constitutes an 'authentic and unaltered' photograph. There can be no doubt, however, about the authenticity of the photographs taken by Mr T. Taylor of Platt Bridge, Lancashire, in 1893, showing the tough conditions of 'Pit Brow Lasses' at work breaking up large lumps of coal at local collieries (Fig. 3). They were not provided with any protective clothing or safety equipment, their eyes were vulnerable to flying shards of coal and they lacked protection from inhaling coal dust. They can be seen wearing lengths of sacking and an assortment of old clothes, and with raw bare hands. Cuttings from contemporary local newspapers emphasise the hard life these women and girls had to endure – a harsh contrast with more sanitised images of the working classes like a commercially popular set of *carte de visite* photos taken by Arthur Munby (1828–1910), a Victorian poet who visited the mines and then created studio photographs of his subjects.

## Cornish Tin Mining

Various other sets came my way which, like the Pit Brow Lass photos, were specifically taken in local situations in the hope that they might have wider appeal, a bit like some of the later newsreel film content. One rare and important set (Fig. 4) is by John C. Burrow (1852–1914), a Cornish photographer who managed to take underground photographs in his local tin mines using explosive flares for lighting – a considerable risk for both photographer and subjects. Apart from all the normal challenges of composition and working with miners unused to being photographed, it must have been very difficult, operating in underground darkness with a bulky mahogany field camera, to determine technical details like the correct lens focus and exposure, or to keep the lens from steaming up in the humid conditions.



1. Two street urchins in their dishevelled state 'before' being taken in by Barnardo's Home – a probably staged photo by Thomas Barnes



2. A group of boys after training in employable skills at Barnardo's Home – a carefully composed 'after' photo by Barnes



3. A group of 'pit brow lasses' engaged on breaking large lumps of coal down into more manageable sizes – hard manual labour with no regard for 'health and safety' of the workers



4. A remarkable piece of underground flash-lit photography by John C. Burrow, showing Cornish tin miners loading wagons in the Cook's Kitchen mine near Redruth. Slide 18 of the set 'Mongst Mines and Miners' (Newton & Co., 1890s)



5. Teams of 'navvies' at work clearing spoil by hand during the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal. Photo by Edward Ward of Manchester, late 1880s



6. 'Sorting the lines', a character study by 'Sol' (Mr A. Watson) which won First Prize in the 'genre' class of the Coventry and Midlands Photographic Society competition, late 1880s

### Manchester Ship Canal

Photography of important construction developments could be seen by a national audience through lantern projections. The building of the Manchester Ship Canal, 36 miles long and officially opened by Queen Victoria on 21 May 1894, was a major engineering project involving roughly 12,000 'navvies'. These photographic slides by Edward Ward (c.1845–1901) capture a small group of these workers stripped down to their shirts, waistcoats and hats wielding picks and shovels (Fig. 5). In the background, one of the 200 rail-mounted steam cranes on site takes away the earth. In the days before newsreel film this sequence of slides could have attracted both local and wider audiences, in the same way that TV documentaries now show the progress of major infrastructure projects.

### Collections found by chance encounter

I have been fortunate to add to my collection through a number of different routes, but some of my favourite items were acquired by sheer good luck. One stunning collection of slides (Figs 6 and 7) had been stored, long forgotten, in a rugged railway trunk in a Midlands warehouse. It turned out to comprise the winning entries from the Coventry and Midlands Photographic Society's competitions from 1888 to 1900, the prize-winning slides having been sent all over the country to be enjoyed by other societies. When the warehouse was demolished an antiques dealer salvaged the trunk, intending to strip off the lettering and railway labels and offer it for sale along with other furniture. The contents were nearly thrown away – but fortunately I was able to arrive

in the right place at the right time. I wrote a more detailed account of these slides for the *New Magic Lantern Journal* in November 1995 (now available on the MLS website).

### Ballard's Fruit Farms

On one occasion, after giving a social history lecture in the Midlands, I met an elderly gentleman named Stephen Ballard, who explained that he was keen that his family collection of photographic slides should be made available for research. He was the third generation of that name, and with no successors he wanted this collection preserved.

The images recorded his family's fruit farming business in Herefordshire, including a pioneering technique for controlling pest damage. This involved making quicklime (calcium oxide) that could be pumped from a kiln through rubber pipes to be sprayed onto the trees – a dangerous procedure putting the workers at risk of eye damage, with no protective clothing provided (Fig. 8). The Ballards had an interesting place in the social history of the Malvern area. The family were strict Methodists, and as they did not approve of alcohol they had to devise an alternative to the traditional Christmas farm-workers' party. The solution was for a local photographer to take these pictures of the staff working on the farm and present these in a lantern show, much to the workers' amusement (Fig. 9).

During busy periods the Ballards employed women from West Midlands chainmakers' workshops as a paid 'working holiday', a chance to escape their overcrowded homes for some holiday merriment and fresh air. The Ballard family, as a strict religious employer, felt that these



7. 'Market scene', showing a butcher's stall in Carlisle Market – photo by 'Tack' (Mr J. Robson), First Prize winner in the 'street life' class of the same competition as Fig. 6



8. Ballard's Fruit Farm employees dressed in old clothes for the task of hot lime washing fruit trees, using an improvised pressure pump on wheels made by adapting a farm cart chassis



9. Women and girls from the Cradley Heath chain-making workshops, employed as seasonal workers on the Ballard's farm – the ages range from young girls to stern-faced matriarchs, all in their Sunday best

young female workers were vulnerable and should be protected. They imposed strict curfews with 'lights out' and fines for breaking any rules. The workers were paid in 'truck currency', which was not accepted in the public houses but could be spent on food at the local shop. Mr Ballard provided a fascinating explanation to the history behind the images, which I transcribed and added to the collection.

### **The future of the collection**

Many of the photographs in this collection were not intended for publication, but for transitory entertainment of their now unknown viewers. Their strength as images lies in their almost casual representation of ordinary people as they went about their daily lives. Neither the photographers nor the people captured on emulsion could have imagined that these images would be considered, up to 150 years later, as an important primary historical record. At the same time, the

accidental fact that they are now all part of a single collection gives them extra value, by allowing connections and contrasts between the different working lives they show.

But what happens next? It's a question that owners of similar collections are no doubt also considering. Some years ago, there might have been the option of trying to keep a collection like this intact by offering it for sale or donation to a suitable museum or other public institution. But given their funding and other resources, few institutions currently seem to consider such acquisitions. In any case there is the everlasting question of what a museum would *do* with a collection of material like lantern slides of which they may have little understanding or experience. My hope is that this collection can continue into the future and become a helpful source for researchers, historians, publishers and broadcasters – but it seems less than certain.