

# The Magic Lantern

## JAMES ASHBURY – BRIGHTON'S POLITICAL LANTERN LECTURER

*Trevor Beattie*

Brighton in the 1870s and 1880s was a booming seaside town with two piers and a third one planned. The population had increased from around 7,300 in 1801 to over 100,000 in 1885, driven chiefly by the arrival of the railway in 1841 and the huge growth of tourism.

After a walk on one of the piers many Victorian holiday makers chose a boat trip, epitomised by the famous cry of "Any more for the *Skylark*?" – the name of the original pleasure boat (Fig. 1). A series of boats of that name were owned by the well-known Brighton character, Captain Fred Collins, who was born in 1832 and died in 1912.

It must have been a smelly voyage. Captain Collins used to take the *Skylark* fishing in the morning, before swilling out the remains of the catch, rigging the boat with bunting and hiring a band to attract passengers.

By the 1880s Collins had built up a flotilla of pleasure craft and had become a celebrity. He was regularly fined for selling alcohol on his yachts without a licence. In 1877 Collins and his son fought a local boat builder in Collins's own beer house. The man died three days later and Collins was arrested for murder. But by then his celebrity was so necessary to Brighton's economy that the jury returned a 'not guilty' verdict without leaving their box.

Not all of the yachts leaving Brighton beach were part of Collins's empire. The lantern slide in Fig. 2 is one of two which show passengers disembarking from a tender on Brighton beach. This has transported them from a much larger vessel moored offshore. They do not look like the usual *Skylark* passengers – they are well dressed and are being carried ashore by liveried sailors. They have clearly not imbibed Collins' illegal alcohol nor are they covered in fish.

Closer inspection shows that the well-equipped and smartly outfitted sailors have the name of a yacht on their sweaters – *Livonia*. This dates the image to between 1872 and 1876, when that yacht had just competed in the America's Cup international yachting race (founded 1851). It was owned by James Lloyd Ashbury, a prominent member of the Brighton Sailing Club, and this is his story.

Ashbury was born in 1835, the only son of a prosperous Manchester factory owner who constructed railway rolling stock at the height of the railway mania (Fig. 3). At the age of 16 he was sent to work in the factory of the Ashbury Railway Carriage and Iron Company Ltd, which covered 12 acres and employed 2,000 people. Unsurprisingly, given that he was the only son of the owner, he quickly rose to become General Manager and then Continental Director, living in Riga for a while where he was responsible for the first Russian railway laid by an English firm.<sup>1</sup> In 1862, aged only 27, he became Managing Director, and then Chairman on his father's death in 1866, inheriting the firm and a substantial personal fortune.

The flamboyant Ashbury did everything at speed, so it is not surprising that, after taking up yachting in 1867, he had won his first race by the following year. Three years later he had become Commodore of the Royal Yacht Club, Harwich. He was obviously a good yachtsman, but I can't help thinking his immense personal fortune also had something to do with it.

By the 1860s Ashbury had moved to Brighton for his health because he could not tolerate the polluted atmosphere of Manchester – to which his firm was a major contributor. In 1870 he made the first of his two challenges for the America's Cup with his yacht *Cambria*, which came eighth, after having to face an American fleet of 14 yachts.

This encouraged Ashbury to try again, and returning to England, he commissioned a new yacht which was purpose-built to challenge for the America's Cup, this time on behalf of the Royal Harwich Yacht Club. It was built in the Isle of Wight and called *Livonia* in tribute to his time in Russia and to the money he had made there (Fig. 4). The yacht was as close to an American build as English shipwrights could manage.



1. Captain Fred Collins' boat Skylark



2. Passengers disembarking from a tender on Brighton beach

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The 1871 competition was controversial from the start.<sup>2</sup> Ashbury successfully challenged the American practice of fielding a fleet of yachts, which he felt had led to his defeat the previous year. He then argued that he should be able to race the *Livonia* on behalf of 12 British yacht clubs, which the New York Yacht Club rejected in a series of acrimonious exchanges. It is not clear why Ashbury wanted to do this after winning his key point of defining the challenge for the Cup as a competition between just two yachts, but I suspect he was trying to get under the skin of the mighty New York Yacht Club.

This set up a grudge match of the best of seven races between *Livonia* and the New York Yacht Club's *Columbia*. The *Columbia* easily won the first race. *Livonia* was well ahead in the second race only to be cut up by *Columbia* at the turning buoy, against all yachting practice, to notch up a second victory. The fuming Ashbury's protests were not upheld and a major row in the press ensued.

*Livonia* won the third race easily when *Columbia* almost capsized. In the next two races *Livonia* was soundly beaten, giving the Americans a 4-1 victory. Ashbury refused to accept the result and announced that he would be on the start line for the final two of the seven races and would sail the twenty mile course whether any yacht was there to meet him or not.

Ashbury won race six against an unofficial contender and claimed race seven even though the weather was too bad to race. He then demanded the America's Cup in a letter to the New York Yacht Club stating that he should have been awarded race two, won race three and had secured two further victories in races six and seven by default. He received no reply. The furious Ashbury returned to Brighton with *Livonia* and without the trophy, accusing the New York Yacht Club of engaging in "unfair and unsportsmanlike proceedings". The Club responded by



3. James Ashbury

returning a number of trophies he had donated in the previous year.

This was how *Livonia* came to be stationed off Brighton beach giving boat trips to prosperous and influential individuals. Ashbury had stood unsuccessfully to become Brighton's Conservative MP in 1868, calling for "reform not revolution" and the provision of education for every man, woman and child. He resolved to use the *Livonia* as part of his campaign for the 1874 General Election.

It is likely that the two slides of disembarking passengers (see Fig. 2) document this period when influential Brighton voters were treated to a sea voyage on a famous America's Cup yacht.

Ashbury also used the magic lantern to support his campaign. *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal (OMLJ)* of October 1895 claimed that he was the first to use the lantern for electioneering.<sup>3</sup> I am not sure that this is correct but the lantern certainly suited Ashbury's colourful, extravagant personality. The *OMLJ* reported that "at the time he was subjected to a good deal of ridicule for having adopted the lantern as a political agent, though time has now shown that he was only a little in advance of others". He was nicknamed 'Lantern Jimmy'. The local press reported that his Liberal opponents "dubbed on the sombre colours with a heavy hand and they could never forgive Ashbury for having invented something more attractive".<sup>4</sup>

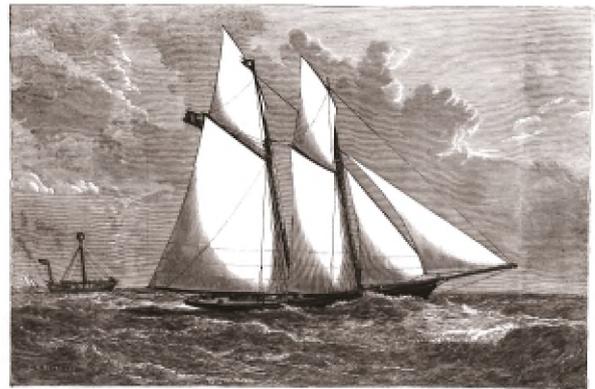
Ashbury's efforts were met with success when he was elected MP for Brighton in 1874. I'd like to think it was the lantern that did it – but I suspect it was probably the liberal amounts of cash for Brighton causes that he had dispensed over the preceding few years. Having served its purpose the *Livonia* was sold to a Russian nobleman in 1876.

Ashbury was a zealous supporter of education for all and was totally opposed to corporal punishment. This aroused the ire of the other Conservative MP for Brighton, Admiral Field, who advocated "the occasional flogging". The local press said that Ashbury's "drawling, languid demeanour was in strange contrast with the rugged roughness of the rollicking Admiral".<sup>5</sup>

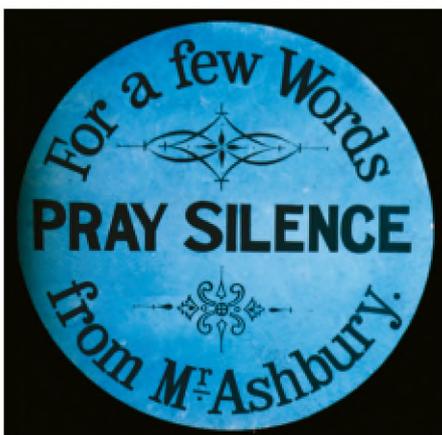
While sitting as an MP in 1876 Ashbury gave dissolving view exhibitions at the Dome in aid of local charities. His lectures covered his travels to India and were attended by a reported 11,000 people.<sup>6</sup> I find this number rather unlikely and suspect that the new MP may have engaged in some tactical exaggeration for the local press.

The success of the 1876 dissolving view shows led to a repeat series in 1877 at the Dome and Brighton Town Hall, covering Ashbury's travels to America, China and Japan as well as slides of the Arctic expedition of 1875.<sup>7</sup> The slides for these lectures are in the collection of Brighton and Hove Museums who display Ashbury's welcome slide (Fig. 5). This illustrates the respect he expected to receive from his audience with its exhortation "pray silence for a few words from Mr Ashbury". From what I know of him I doubt that his words were ever few!

A detailed description of the 1877 lecture in the local press gives a good impression of Ashbury's lecturing style.<sup>8</sup> For instance: "a number of beautifully painted slides of the various compartments of the White Star Line steamship *Germania* in which the Hon. Member made the passage to New York were exhibited and aided the formation of an excellent impression of the elegant and comfortable manner in which the vessels on this particular line are fitted up." Later



4. James Ashbury's yacht *Livonia*



5. James Ashbury's welcome slide

we are told that "like the French, the Yankees of both sexes bathe together and to give an idea of the costume worn during the healthful recreation several views of bathing parties were exhibited." The lantern lecture received many repeat performances, including one to an audience including a visiting Chinese Minister, which is surprising given the amount of casual racism accompanying Ashbury's descriptions of his travels in China.

These world-spanning travels were undertaken during what Ashbury called "the long Parliamentary holidays". I have a feeling that he was not a very assiduous or hard-working local MP!

It is therefore not very surprising that Ashbury lost the 1880 election, when both of the Brighton seats returned to the Liberals. It then became apparent that his time as an MP, traveller, lantern lecturer and yachtsman had distracted him from his business interests which were beginning to fail.

In a desperate attempt to start a thriving business in another booming location like Brighton, Ashbury purchased a large sheep station in Merrivale on the South Island of New Zealand. This soon, however, became a major financial liability. Ashbury was unable to pay his creditors and spent many years in the courts, eventually facing bankruptcy. It must have been immensely painful for this extravagant public figure, used to operating on the world stage and launching his own high profile legal actions, to sink into obscurity as a defendant in the bankruptcy courts.

The final act took place in some humble London lodgings in September 1895 when the newspapers reported that the body of an elderly "gentleman of no occupation" known as James Ashbury had been found, having apparently taken his life with an overdose.<sup>9</sup> It was several days before his identity emerged. His remaining assets passed to a distant cousin, there being no nearer relative.

I think Ashbury's sad story deserves to be better known. He was the catalyst for rule changes that introduced greater fairness to the America's Cup, for which he was belatedly inducted into its Hall of Fame in 1997. He was a practical lantern lecturer, a political progressive, a determined individual and an innovator who deserves at least a footnote in the history of the magic lantern. I wish I'd known him.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Brighton Gazette*, Thursday 17 March 1904, p. 2 contains a short biography of Ashbury
2. There is an excellent account of Ashbury's challenges for the America's Cup in the history section of the Cup's website: [www.americascup.com/history/12\\_THE-CUP-GETS-UGLY-THE-1871-CHALLENGE](http://www.americascup.com/history/12_THE-CUP-GETS-UGLY-THE-1871-CHALLENGE)
3. *Optical Magic Lantern Journal (OMLJ)*, Vol. 6, No. 77 October 1895, p. 1
4. *Brighton Gazette*, Saturday 13 January 1906, p. 5
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Brighton Guardian*, Wednesday 14 March 1877, p. 7
7. Advertised in the *Brighton Herald*, Saturday 17 March 1877, p. 2
8. *Brighton Guardian*, Wednesday 14 March 1877, p. 7
9. The details of Ashbury's later life come from the summary biography at [www.america-scoop.com/index.php/en/actors/owners/1321-ashbury-james-loyd-1834-1895-uk](http://www.america-scoop.com/index.php/en/actors/owners/1321-ashbury-james-loyd-1834-1895-uk)