

# ROSES FOR REMEMBRANCE

Sandra Lawrence

Back in November, while wearing my 'Ellen Willmott' hat (not literally, her hats were hideous) (see *TML* 35, p. 7) I was introduced to a chap who had rescued minute books, membership records and challenge cups from a skip after the demise of the once-powerful Royal National Rose Society in 2017. I was excited; Ellen was a major mover and shaker in this society, and, sure enough, her fingerprints were all over the paperwork.

I was delighted also to find, among a large quantity of exquisite glass half-plate rose portraits taken using the Henschel Colourtype Process (used as the frontispiece of the ever-popular yearly publication *The Rose Annual*), approximately 200 3¼-inch magic lantern slides.

It is hard to grasp just how popular the National Rose Society (NRS) was in Edwardian England (it only became 'Royal' in 1965 despite previous royal associations). In 1901 it had a total of 750 members. By 1914 that number had risen to 6,035. Roses *were* Edwardian England.



Ashtown rose



Croydon Show 1914, first prize

The NRS had been dabbling with lantern slides since at least 1913. Some of the most beautiful – and fragile – remaining examples are Autochromes recording gardens from around 1913-14. Pale, pastel visions, speckled with flecks of potato starch, reveal misty arbours, arches and pergolas, and roses with names like 'Blush Rambler', 'Felicite Perpetue' and 'Hiawatha'.

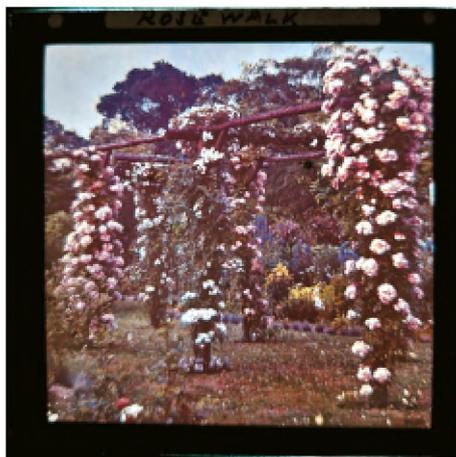
The most poignant, also in Autochrome, record the winners of the Croydon Horticultural Society's 47th Annual Show, 1914. Colour photography was expensive and the NRS was not about to waste money on pictures of the event itself – which is a shame – but even pampered prizewinning roses sitting stiffly in silver vases become moving when we look at the date: 24 June 1914. Four days later, hundreds of miles away, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. The National Rose Society would never be the same again.

During the First World War ornamental gardening became unpatriotic. People needed food, and great gardens of Britain were grubbed up for allotments. The National Rose Society put on a brave face, but *The Rose Annual* become thinner, the articles shorter. Many shows were put on hold – Chelsea was one such victim – and NRS gatherings were downplayed as non-competitive displays.

Yet meetings continued, even with dwindling membership and the diminishing supply of young men. The Society's answer seems to have been the Lectures and Lantern Slides Committee, headed by Mr H.L. Wettren, "a well-known amateur gardener", which created two sets of slides "for sending out on loan to any of its own Affiliated Societies or to other Societies requiring them". This last aim will explain the 'advertising' slides also found, listing current NRS membership charges and benefits.

No duplicate sets appear to have been made, and the Society's *Arrangements for 1915* makes it clear the slides were intended for small groups rather than massed gatherings. Members are told "these slides may be shown with an ordinary oil lantern. They are seen at the best when the screen picture is not more than 5 ft by 5 ft." Local groups had to submit a deposit of £2, from which the carriage charge was deducted, and the rest was only returned if the slides came back in perfect condition.

'Set A' lists images of horticultural techniques, sundry pests and diseases and named roses, as photographed at Kew Gardens on specific dates. The various rose gardens also listed appear to include the earlier Autochrome images, while a final group shows cut blooms arranged in vases. These photographs may be hand-tinted or, perhaps, taken using the Henschel process. 'Set B' appears to be more of the same,



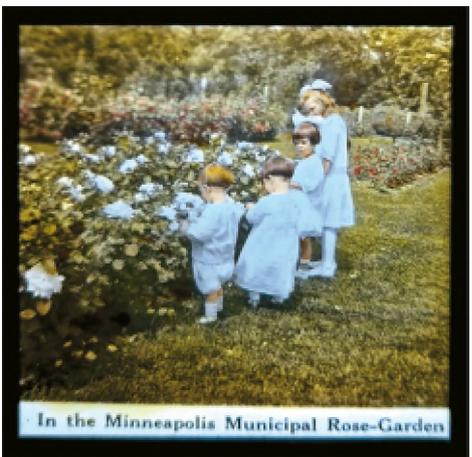
Rose walk

but I have not yet been able to match the images against their listings. The *List of Lantern Slides* printed in 1916 also mentions 60 slides of *American Grown Roses and Gardens* available for loan. There are a few of these in the extant collection, but it appears incomplete. Oddly, there are no lecturers' notes. Societies are told to create their own, referring to the NRS *Official Catalogue and Handbook on Pruning*.

Upper lips remained stiff throughout the War. Articles in *The Rose Annual* began with lines such as "What is the use of growing roses when the great guns are booming on sea and land?" Answer: "to help along the strenuous and often stony path of duty," but the mask was growing thin. By 1918 the Chairman's preface admitted:

"For the fourth year *The Rose Annual* appears while Europe is still in the throes of one of the most awful catastrophes that has ever befallen. This volume will reach many of our Members who are actively engaged in the great struggle for liberty and right, and it is to them that the hearts of all Rosarians at home turn at these critical times".

Not nearly enough of those garden-loving lads would ever see the National Rose Society's lantern slides. We can only hope *The Rose Annual*, with its coloured photographs, if passed around the trenches, reminded them a little of home.



In the Minneapolis Municipal Rose-Garden (USA)