

OBITUARY

DOUG LEAR (1948–2025)

A few months ago came the sad news that Doug Lear, who co-created the legendary *Lear's Magical Lanterns* show with his wife Anita (see *TML* 16 for her obituary), had died in March this year. Nobody who saw their show on canal boat or on land could ever forget it, and many MLS members were hooked for life as a result.

Doug grew up in Porthcawl, South Wales, the youngest of three children. His father was a gardener (a collector from an early age, one of Doug's first collections was plant cuttings) and coal miner – his grandfather had been a soldier and his grandmother a munitions factory worker in World War II. As a pupil at Bridgend Grammar School he was in the same class as renowned international rugby player J.P.R. Williams.

While studying at Manchester College of Art and Design in 1970, he met Anita. Doug had come across magic lanterns when researching his thesis on 19th century photography and his life-changing interest was sparked. Together Doug and Anita moved to London in 1971 and they began collecting magic lantern slides, lanterns and other essentials for a show. This was a time when there was relatively little interest in magic lanterns.

In 1974 they moved to Yorkshire with their young son Elwyn, where they both taught at art colleges. The river close to where they lived in Rawmarsh, near Rotherham, gave Doug the idea of creating a magic lantern show on a narrowboat. Having purchased a hull in 1976, they built a boat





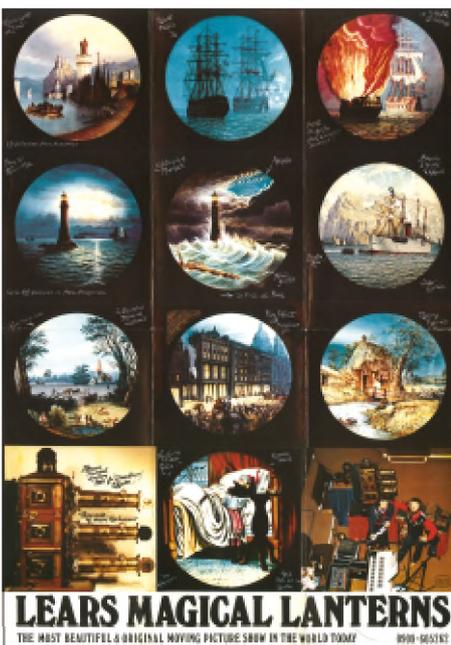
On board Carina, one of the narrowboats



With Elwyn aboard – a postcard

While Milton Keynes council did not take up Doug's idea of giant fibreglass statues of Disney characters in the middle of the city's many roundabouts, they were interested in his idea for a magic lantern museum. They allocated a plot of land and offered £1m if Doug could raise the other £1m required. He realised he was more interested in becoming the curator than in being a fundraiser on that scale, so looked for where they could possibly purchase a large house. The answer was North Wales, where improvements to the A55 road from over the border seemed to promise the arrival of many holidaymakers to visit the museum. At the last stage the council refused planning permission. However, Llandrindod Wells in mid-Wales, home of an annual Victorian Festival, was more welcoming and they moved to a big house there. But Anita had had enough, and in 1991 sadly this extraordinary partnership broke up. Doug tried to carry on the museum but it became increasingly difficult, and in January 1996 nearly all their magic lantern collection was sold at Christie's in London.

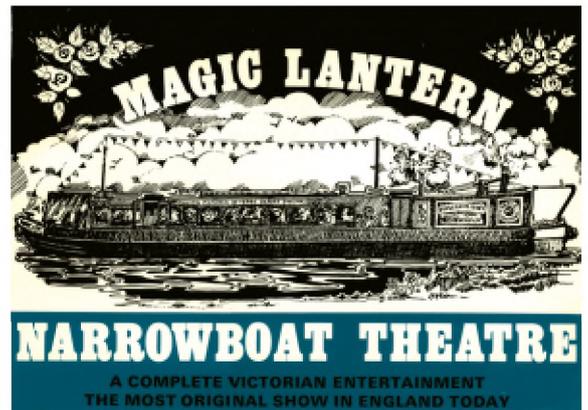
At one point Doug became interested in the Shroud of Turin and by writing directly to the scientists involved managed to acquire a 5 x 4 inch negative of it. By using the triunial he produced a realistic image using positive and negative images.



themselves and took it on a maiden voyage by river to York in 1977. Trips to Skipton and Shropshire persuaded them that canals were a much less hazardous waterway to navigate and in 1978 they bought a ready-made second boat (built in 1936), increasing their audience capacity from 12 to 35. They spent five years living on the boats, giving around 2,000 shows. Part of the year was spent moored up in Little Venice, London, where they played to capacity audiences with increasing acclaim. A second son Merlyn joined the showboat with Newton the dog, and later on, after the canal years, a third son Cai. Elwyn recalls attending 15 different schools during the travelling years.

Doug would present the shows and play the musical accompaniment, helping Anita with the projection when more than two hands were needed and dealing with the 'special effects'. All their slides had movement, effects or were dissolving views, mainly projected via their iconic Steward triunial lantern. They appeared in numerous newspaper and magazine articles as well as several TV programmes including the BBC's *Blue Peter*. Among their fans were *The Muppets'* Jim Henson and magician Paul Daniels.

In 1982 the Lears moved to a permanent base in Milton Keynes and a mooring at the Arts Centre to give their growing family more stability and avoid near-death incidents caused by falling off the boat. This also enabled them to take their show on the road in Europe, at first in a Reliant Robin. By the end they had travelled an estimated 250,000 miles and performed in 800 theatres in places such as Barcelona, Amsterdam, Cologne and Vienna. Extensive press cuttings demonstrate their popularity. One highlight was performing at Philips in the Netherlands at the start of their collaboration with ASMI in developing semiconductor lithography technology (now ASML).



After a partnership that produced a daughter named Poppy, Doug settled happily with his final partner Joy Wilde and played saxophone in various North Wales jazz bands ... while doing a little collecting on the side.

Doug's second son Merlyn describes his father as "indeed Victorian, but in the most romantic way." He believes that Doug's fascination for magic lanterns was "the wonder of Victorian art mixed with light and animation." Merlyn himself is now a computer animator.

Mary Ann Auckland

I am very grateful to Doug and Anita's two sons Elwyn and Merlyn Lear for their enormous help in writing this obituary. You can read about their visit to the MLS Summer Meeting on p. 16.



Doug at the museum in Llandrindod Wells