PHOTOGRAPHY — AN IMAGE OF LOCAL HISTORY

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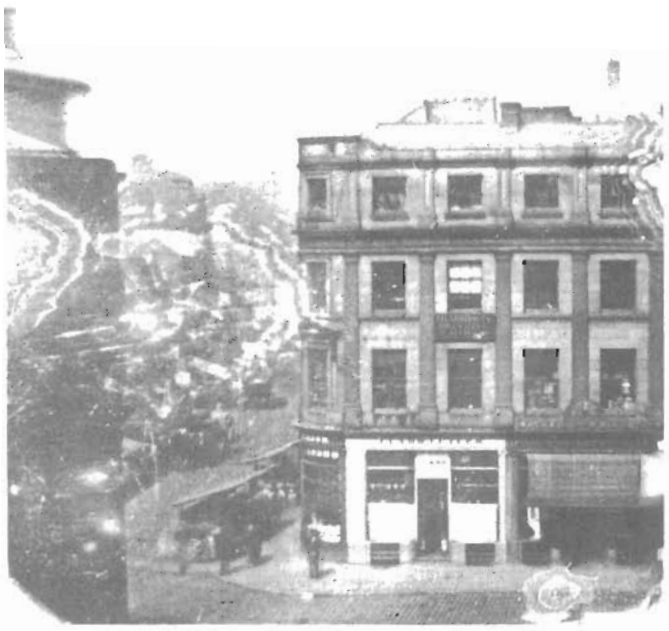
Photography's History

Sometime between 1822 and 1827 — the most favoured date is 1826 — Joseph Nicephore Niepce produced the world's first permanent photograph, and arguably from that moment, history changed. For centuries the written word and the artist's brush had been the conveyor of history. Almost from its inception as a *practical process* c.1840, photography took on the role of creating a permanent record of history.

Although Niepce is recorded in the annals of photography as the creator of the first photograph — an eight-hour exposure of the view of his courtyard from an upstairs window — his process was not at all practical. Using a pewter plate as the base, coated with bitumen of Judea, he produced a poor quality, grainy image which could never have been widely exploited. It was Louis Daguerre, a French impresario, and Henry Fox Talbot, the squire of Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire, to whom the real accolades were to be directed. Working independently, these two gentlemen produced two entirely different solutions to the problem of creating a permanent photograph.[1]

Daguerre's early process used a silvered copper plate exposed to chlorine and bromine vapours to produce the light sensitive coating. Like Niepce's answer to the problem, the *Daguerreotype* produced a single direct positive image — the mirror with a memory as it was often called, due to the mirror-like surface of the polished plate. Daguerreotypes sold in their millions throughout the world, and many fine portraits survive today using that process. The earliest photograph of Manchester showing the corner of Market Street and Cross Street is a Daguerreotype. It survives in the Greater Manchester Museum of Science and Industry Collection.



Daguerreotype of Market Street, 1841.

Detail of photographic case, c. 1850.

The real father of photography, however, was to be Henry Talbot. To him we owe the concept of the photographic negative — his were produced on paper — from which countless prints could be made. Using larger cameras than Daguerre, Talbot's *Calotype* process produced the first paper photographic prints, the first photographically illustrated books, and the beginnings of modern photography as we know it today.[2]

Later inventors such as Gustave le Gray, introduced the *Waxed Paper Process* with many distinct advantages over the Calotype. The early paper processes did not keep well — so users of Talbot's process had to prepare their materials just before use. Le Gray's process allowed negatives to be coated several weeks before use, and processed several weeks after exposure — thus giving photographers the freedom to travel for the first time.[3]

The glass plate achieved international success with Frederick Scott Archer's *Wet Collodion* process — giving quality which can not even be surpassed today. It was with the collodion process that the real expansion of photography took place — thousands of studios opened up throughout the country, and the greatest names in Victorian photography started to emerge.[4]

The wet collodion negative plate — which used the potentially lethal mixture of guncotton, ether and alcohol to carry the light sensitive emulsion — reigned supreme for nearly thirty years from its introduction in 1851. Allied to the *Albumen* print, superb quality imagery was produced in skilled hands — a large proportion of which survives to this day. As an amusing by-product of the early photographic industry, the albumen print paper produced a huge quantity of egg yolks. The egg white was used as the binding and coating vehicle for the light sensitive coating on the paper, but the industry had no need for the yolks. A *Photographer's Cookbook* suggesting countless things to do with egg yolks, sold well in the 1850s and 1860s.

Manchester's contribution to the development of photography at this stage was both considerable and

diverse — not only were Manchester photographers pioneering new processes and techniques — John Benjamin Dancer with photography through a microscope is but one example — but they were also improving existing techniques and processes. Much valuable work in improving the wet collodion and waxed paper processes was carried out by James Mudd and Joseph Sidebotham, together with other illustrious members of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society.

By the 1880s, dry plates were available — and by the end of the decade they were being mass produced as the photographic industry got into gear.[5] Roll film and the box camera appeared in the last decade of the century and, by the end of Queen Victoria's reign, a significant change was taking place in photography. As cameras became cheaper and easier to use, the role of historical recorder moved from the full-time professional to the amateur photographer. Although they were entering the mass production era, however, even the simplest box camera remained a middle and upper-class toy for some time to come. But, nonetheless, social historical documents became less formal, more intimate and, arguably, more interesting as a result. While we put on a formal face for the professional camera, we expose our more natural selves to family and friends.

As the century drew to a close, many of the types and standards of photographic materials with which we are familiar today were emerging — the flexible film negative, the gelatine-bromide print and so on. Colour, at first added artificially by the artist's brush, appeared in a real sense with the introduction of the French *Autochrome* transparency process in the early years of this century and fine colour photographs were produced in the Great War. At about the same time the engraving, for centuries the only means of illustrating newspapers and magazines, was replaced by the half tone photograph and the idea of first-hand news photography was born. The colour print did not appear until much later — between the wars — and as this century has progressed, quality has become better and better.

***Mill Girls photographed** by Rev. William Wickham, c. 1891.*

While early photographs have proved to be remarkably permanent, many of this century's improvements in colour, sharpness and quality have brought with them a reduction in permanence — so there is every likelihood that, for future historians, there will be a short gap in their archive of visual history unless steps are taken to overcome the fade characteristics of many of the early 'rapid' processes of the 1960s. It would be a ludicrous situation if photographs from the 1850s were more readily available to the historian a century from now than were the images of the swinging sixties!

Identifying and Dating Photographs

The earliest photographs to be found in any collection bar one — the University of Austin, Texas has the original Niepce pewter plate — are Daguerreotypes. Daguerreotypes share with their later imitators — *Ambrotypes* or *Collodion positives* — the likelihood that they are preserved in leather or plastic cases. The Daguerreotype, however, is easily recognised by the mirror surface on which the image is carried. When viewed under certain light, the Daguerreotype can appear to switch from positive to negative in its tonal values. The Ambrotype, which is in fact carried on a glass rather than silvered copper plate, is less brilliant and always appears positive. Both image forms are also largely devoted to portraiture. To find Daguerreotypes or Ambrotypes of architectural, industrial or other subject matter is unusual in the extreme.[6] Both are usually restricted to small plates — a fact which almost excluded them from the vast proportion of non-portraiture subjects. That effectively means that the majority of events and locations covered by photography date from the introduction of the large glass plate and the paper print — post 1851.

The wet collodion process spawned a variety of formats all of which can be commonly found in most collections. The large print — always produced by contact from the original negative as enlargers had not been invented — dates from about 1851 onwards. In the 1850s also, two small formats were introduced which can be found in enormous numbers today — the small *carte de visite* print, and the pair of *stereoscopic* photographic prints.

The carte de visite, introduced by the French photographer Disderi in the late 1850s, involved the mounting of a small print on to a card the same size as the Victorian visiting card. This format had the effect of drastically reducing the unit cost of photography — the Daguerreotype and the Ambrotype were both very expensive — and thus introducing photography to the working classes. Thus, post 1858, the working class themselves visited photographers. Up until then any working-class portraits were taken out of curiosity by professional photographers — character studies rather than commissioned portraits. By the early 1860s, all strata of society were used to photography, used to being photographed, and were buying and collecting photographs. The era of the family album had arrived.

The boom in three-dimensional imagery came in the late 1850s also, and reached such a pitch that almost every Victorian drawing room had a stereo viewer. Two images, usually each just under three inches square and often with an arched top, were mounted on a small piece of (usually yellow) card. The craze lasted about ten years at its

Foden's Steam Removal Van, Wigan.

height, but stereo images have never ceased to be produced. Generally, the older ones are on a yellow card or a plain buff card. Stereoscopic Daguerreotypes were also produced in limited numbers, as were glass transparency stereo slides designed for viewing by transmitted rather than reflected light.

Cabinet prints just over twice the size of the carte de visite, date from the 1860s — a format introduced to meet the demand of a wealthier clientele who wanted larger images for the family album. Unlike the carte, which was used for architectural and topographical subjects, the cabinet print is almost exclusively portraiture.

While the salt prints made from Calotype paper negatives, and the albumen prints produced from both calotype and wet collodion negatives are brown in colour, later gelatine-bromide prints are more likely to be black and white. Naturally the albumen print was more of a purple brown than the rich sepia which we associate today with Victorian photography. That more acceptable colour was produced by toning the prints with gold chloride to both enhance the colour and resist fading. It is that fact which has ensured that so many of the pictures have survived to this day.

Photography as Evidence

One could expend many thousands of words on the subject of whether or not the photograph has ever been able to live up to the public perception of its accuracy as a preserver of fact. Suffice it to say at this stage that the idea that the camera cannot lie would, if put to the test, be found wanting in many and significant respects. There is a tendency to believe that what you see is what actually occurred. In many cases, that may not be true. Early photography was hampered by slow materials — requiring long exposures which in turn required people to adopt poses which could be held for minutes on end. Therein lies the basis of one of the many misconceptions we have of the Victorians — they were all very serious as evidenced by their photographs. It is well nigh impossible to sustain a smiling face for several minutes without blinking or moving. Thus, a sombre neutral expression was adopted — face muscles relaxed, eyes wide open. As to other reasons for not smiling — those long exposures were achieved by gripping the subject's head in a potentially painful head clamp carefully positioned behind the chair. One false move and pain would have been the result — and that is no smiling matter. However, reference to Victorian literature, to music hall acts and so on makes it quite clear that they were anything but humourless. This is but one simple example of the mis-information offered by viewing photographs in isolation from the society they served.

There is a well known story of just how inaccurate photographic evidence can be. The Aberdonian photographer George Washington Wilson, photographer to Queen Victoria in Scotland, frequently photographed Her Majesty on her Balmoral estates. In one photographic session, he produced a photograph of the Queen and her trusted staff — Victoria is on horseback, John Brown — her ghillie — is holding the reins, and another keeper stands next to the horse's back legs. The picture is, most naturally, square. The growing market in the early 1860s, however, was for carte de visite pictures and they were usually vertical, so Wilson cropped out the second servant, and produced commercially available cartes of just the Queen and John Brown — totally changing the relationships within the picture and fanning the rumours which were already high on the gossip lists. What had been a picture of the Queen and her servants, was suddenly changed to an apparently rather intimate portrait of the Queen and one favoured servant. We know of that particular change of emphasis because the original

Roger Fenton by William Sparling, 1855.

negative still exists. Had we no such proof, quite inaccurate conclusions could be drawn. The same warning ought to be borne in mind before any interpretation is placed on the unsupported appearances contained within a photographic print.

The region's most famous photographer, Roger Fenton, son of a Rochdale mill-owner, is best known for his series of photographs of the Crimean War, sets of which are preserved in several local collections. Fenton was involved in a semi-political commission, albeit financed by Manchester publisher Thomas Agnew. His central purpose was the demonstration that reports in *The Times* by Sir William Howard Russell about conditions in the British camps and trenches were exaggerated. In achieving a certain political aim, reality was manipulated both by intention and by necessity. By intention in the exclusion of all contradictory evidence in the pictures themselves, and by necessity in that the processes being used were incapable of spontaneous recording. Thus Fenton's pictures show a stage-managed war. On the same ship which took him to the Crimea were the supplies which Russell had reported were missing from the theatre of war. In Fenton's photographs, soldiers wearing winter clothing — missing during the extremes of a Crimean winter — were photographed in the baking heat of a Crimean summer. If officers were in short supply for the cosy "convivial drinking parties" which were thought to be a high spot of a British military campaign, Fenton and his assistant William Sparling posed themselves in the pictures.

The photographs are, in themselves, a marvellous achievement, given the conditions under which they were taken, but as accurate historical documents they leave a lot to be desired.[7] Interestingly, Fenton wrote home both to his wife and to Agnew during his period in the Crimea, and his letters pull no punches. Read through the letters while looking at the photographs, and they give the lie to the image of war the pictures convey. So powerfully do they contradict the visual evidence, that they seem almost to be Fenton appeasing his own conscience.[8] Fenton's photography told lies which were accepted as truth because they could be seen. His letters home — not published until a century later — told the real truth. Visual "evidence" should never be accepted at face value. Only when the motives are understood do the images reveal their true selves.

With any photograph it is essential to bear in mind that what you see is not necessarily all that was going on. Photography is, by its very nature, selective. It is merely a window through which we have limited vision and outside that vision may well have been contradictory evidence.

The camera can be used to manipulate reality — and indeed has been so used since the dawn of photography. The same subject matter — the building blocks of a photograph — can be used to present quite contradictory images. So much of photography is selective, subjective and individual. If photographers are to be seen as creative people, then their objectivity must, always, be open to question. The photograph cannot be assumed to be an objective record. It is a subjective interpretation of reality — and that can be a long way from reality itself.

The extent to which subjectivity gets in the way of objectivity will, of course, depend on the subject matter. While the building of the Manchester Ship Canal was photographed subjectively by a variety of photographers, the factuality of the photographs is beyond dispute. The purpose that the photographs were designed to serve is apolitical, and therefore the approach is reasonably objective, with a creative overlay in terms of composition and viewpoint.[9] However, when the subject matter has political undertones, such objectivity cannot be assumed.

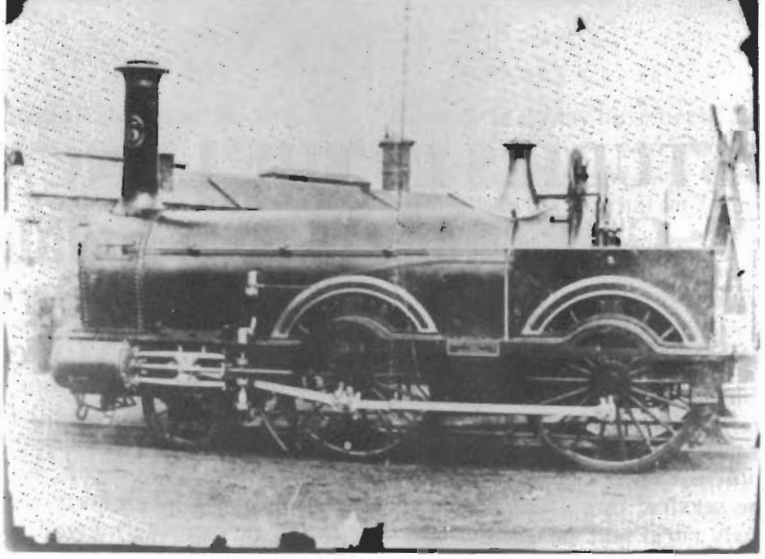
These photographs are by no means unique in presenting either a partisan or partial view of history. Even if the photographic evidence is not biased in such an obvious way, today's historian has a constant problem in ensuring that the conditions, attitudes and content of early photography are judged and interpreted against contemporary yardsticks rather than the standards of today.

Photographic Archives in the Manchester Region

The Manchester Region is well served by photographic archives — just as throughout the last century and a half it has been well served by photographers of quality and note.[10]

Most remarkable both in terms of its size and its breadth is the collective holdings of the various libraries housed in Manchester Central Reference Library. There is, hidden within that one building — and I do mean hidden in many respects — a treasure house of historic photography. Like just about every other library collection, you almost have to know exactly what you are looking for, before you can find anything. That necessarily precludes the happy accident of coming across something special just by chance. Only when collections are properly loaded on to a computer database will access be open enough to be really useful to the picture researcher.

Reference has already been made to the excellent collection at the Museum of Science & Industry — in



Beyer Peacock Locomotive, c. 1856.

addition to the Mudd archives from Beyer Peacock, are important collections of material relating to John Benjamin Dancer and other major figures in the history of photography.

The Documentary Photographic Archive established at Manchester Polytechnic is also essential visiting — this collection is unique in the region in being a living collection — with modern material being added all the time to complement the early historic material. This is essential if an archive is to serve a future historical purpose as well as satisfying current needs. The local Borough Libraries are also rich sources of materials — as are museums and companies with a long established history.

Finding just what is available is not quite as hit-and-miss as might at first be anticipated, as a number of essential reference books are available. The *Directory of British Photographic Collections* by John Wall (RPS/ Heinemann, 1977), and *Picture Source UK* edited by Rosemary Eakins, (Macdonald, 1986) are both essential starting points. The latter is bang up to date. The RPS publication is some ten years old now, so contacts, addresses and phone numbers may be obsolete.

Also good starting points for researching photographic material are the Batsford *Victorian & Edwardian* series of books, and the excellent series of *As It Was* publications by the Hendon Publishing Company in Nelson. After that, it is just the leg work of visiting collections and leafing through thousands of pictures.

Over the years, any researcher working frequently with local sources will doubtless feel a wish to put something back in for the hours of help local library staffs, local authorities and others may have given. Over six books and four TV programmes using local history archives material, I have built up a good reciprocal arrangement with my own local authority's archives — and archivist — in Wigan.[11] An archive of pictures — just like anything else — depends on us. We can only take out of it what has been put in. In the picture researches for my own contributions to the illustrated history of Wigan, I have now unearthed by a variety of means over two hundred pictures which were not previously available from the local archives. By supplying them with a copy print of every new image offered to me, the material becomes available for other researchers to study and use. So it is a two way thing — their collection is at my disposal — and I add to their's by way of saying thank you.

NOTES

1. The original Niepce photograph is part of the Gernsheim Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, two versions of it are frequently reproduced. The actual visual appearance of the photograph is almost indecipherable, so a heavily retouched and enhanced version is frequently illustrated. This is just one of many instances where what you see is not necessarily accurate.
2. *The Pencil of Nature* the first photographically illustrated book was published by Longmans in parts in 1844.
3. For more information on Waxed Paper and the local photographers who used the process, see J. Hannavy, *The Waxed Paper Process in Photography 1850—1865*, unpublished Ph.D., Manchester Polytechnic, 1984.
4. The Royal Photographic Society Historical Group publishes lists of photographers in specific towns or areas researched by the Society's members. For Manchester Regional researchers, the following have been published, and are a useful basis for dating photographs. In each case, the name and address of each photographer is accompanied by the dates between which he or she was active at each given address. See Gillian Read, *Manchester Photographers 1840—1900* (1982), John Hannavy & Chris Ryan, *Professional Photographers in Wigan 1853—1925* (1987).
5. From its inception, the photographic industry has had a major presence in the Manchester area. The camera manufacturers J.T. Chapman, Thornton Pickard and others were based in and around Manchester, the photographic materials have been made at Mobberley in Cheshire since before the turn of the century. For a history of the Ilford Company's presence in the Region, see *Silver By The Ton*, Ilford Ltd., (1985).
6. As most industrial and commercial applications of photography required a large scale image, these aspects of photography did not really get going until larger negatives from which prints could be made were possible. The earliest industrial photographic project to be undertaken on behalf of a large company was started in Gorton by James Mudd in 1856. Using the waxed paper process, and later both wet and dry collodion, he embarked on a long term project to give the Beyer Peacock company a photographic record of each new locomotive design to come out of their works. The collection, which was continually added to long after Mudd ceased photography, is now preserved by the Greater Manchester Museum of Science & Industry.
7. For a detailed look at Fenton's life and work, see J. Hannavy, *Roger Fenton of Crimble Hall* (1975).
8. The letters are published in full in H. and A. Gernsheim, *Roger Fenton: Photographer of the Crimea* (1954)
9. The Manchester Ship Canal Company, and Manchester Central Library both have extensive collections of these important and historic photographs.
10. Much important information on Manchester's most important photographers is contained in M. Hallett, *Significant Years in the History of Photography in Manchester*, unpublished MPhil, Manchester Polytechnic (1976).
11. John Hannavy, *Pictures of Wigan*, Wigantech Publications (1978 & 1984); John Hannavy & Roy Lewis; *Maypole, Diary of a Mining Disaster*, Wigantech Publications (1983); John Hannavy & Jack Winstanley, *Wigan Pier: An Illustrated History*, Smiths Books, Wigan (1985); John Hannavy & Chris Ryan, *Living & Working in Wigan*, Smiths Books (1986); John Hannavy & Chris Ryan, *Working in Wigan Mills*, Smiths Books (1987); John Hannavy & Chris Ryan, *Wigan's Railways*, Smiths Books (for 1988 publication); *The Past in Focus*, three programmes for BBC2 North West (1986); John Hannavy & Jack Winstanley, *The Story of Wigan Pier*, BBC2 North West (1986).