

10. The hot potato 1877-1896

There was nothing obviously wrong with the studio at 4 London Road. When Edwin Bullock moved the short distance there in 1872, he described the premises as ‘much more commodious’ with ‘an entirely unobstructed light’.¹ The building faced west, and so lacked the easy facility for north light that photographers often sought, but he evidently saw that as no great problem. The Wrights’ building just across the road also had an east-west axis, and it served them well for decades.

London Road had been become increasingly built-up in recent years. The process had begun before the arrival of the railway in the late 1840s and had continued ever since. There were those who admired the elegance of the new houses and the recently erected Methodist Church and County Court,² but not everybody was impressed. Historian G. G. Coulton, recalling a childhood spent in the area in the late 1860s, declared, ‘The whole of London Road, from the Greyfriars Field to the South Gates, was mere modern jerry-building, with the exception of a few old houses hidden behind, and clustering round, South Lynn Church.’³

The success of the Wright studio over the years nevertheless demonstrates that London Road was a part of town to which clients could be attracted. Yet nobody would keep the studio at number 4 for very long, and in the 18-year period from 1877 to 1895 it was home to seven different photographic businesses. It may, of course, be that the Wrights’ success made it difficult for competitors to thrive on what came to be thought of as their patch. Whatever the reason, 4 London Road had a high turnover of occupants.

The studio’s earlier history has already been treated and requires no more than a brief recapitulation. Edwin Bullock transferred his operations there in 1872, but Wallis and Manders, whom he had referred to with withering scorn, took over the premises – with his apparent blessing – at the end of 1877. They then ran the studio in tandem with their original business, aiming for a more upmarket operation at London Road, where they traded as the King’s Lynn Photographic Company. They presented a brashly confident face to the public, but they did not stay long. Victor Manders moved on to practice in Essex between 1879 and 1881, and by July 1881 Christopher Wallis had also left the town and had set up in Monmouthshire. Then came Edwin Mowl, with studio experience in London and Lancashire, and he was to occupy the studio for nearly seven years.

His immediate past had been spent in Burnley, where he had, naturally enough, made advertising capital of his experience with Elliott & Fry,⁴ and where he had emerged unscathed from a dangerous incident. ‘Soon after lighting a fire in a stove in his studio’, the *Burnley Express* reported, he ‘noticed that a number of window blinds used for the reflection of light were on fire’. The flames spread rapidly and ‘there threatened to be a very serious conflagration’, but Mowl ‘managed, with great promptitude, to prevent the fire from spreading, and with the exception of the loss of a few blinds no serious damage was done.’⁵

Now settled in Lynn, Mowll showed himself to be a forward-looking professional with a sharp sense of emerging photographic trends. For much of the 1890s many photographers favoured dark-coloured, gold-lettered mounts of thick card. Those with a finger on the pulse of emerging taste started to use such mounts in the 1880s, and Mowll was one of them. Eschewing the decade's inclination towards mounts with highly decorated pictorial backs, he preferred opulence to fussiness and chose stout black card with a soft sheen. The lettering was printed in gold, and his signature – ending with a flourish to the second 'l' – featured prominently. Also characteristic of the 1890s was the vignette portrait, where a round or oval head-and-shoulders close-up faded away into a white background. There was nothing new about the vignetting technique. It had been possible since the early days of photography, and Edwin Bullock, in particular, had made some use of it in back in the 1870s. But in the 1890s it would become so popular as to be almost obligatory. It had become a significant part of Mowll's repertoire in the 1880s, well before its universal adoption.

Evidence is limited, but it appears that he also secured his share of the local out-of-studio work. This, at any rate, is suggested by a picture of a Wesleyan Sunday Schools parade that has survived in the care of the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service,⁶ and by a commission to attend James Fiddaman's lavish private party at Holkham in 1883.⁷

Portraiture, however, remained vital to his work, and this won satisfying recognition in 1886, when *The Graphic*, an illustrated weekly, ran features on recently-elected members of the House of Commons. Pictures of the MPs were required to accompany the text, and these took the form of engravings based on photographs. It was to Mowll that the paper turned for portraits of Lynn representatives Lord Bentinck⁸ and Sir Alexander Weston Jarvis.⁹ *The Graphic* gave full acknowledgement to its sources, and Mowll found himself one of a distinguished list, alongside such names as Bassano, Barraud, Disdéri and Mayall, all eminent London photographers. It seems reasonable to wonder why Mowll, a relative newcomer to the town, should have been called on. The Dexter and Wright studios were both longer-established, but Mowll may well have been aiming at a more exclusive sector of the market than either of these. More to the point, though, is his background. His earlier experience in London, though not in a studio bearing his own name, was probably important: he had been employed by society photographers Elliott and Fry. In short, he had contacts.

Mowll probably continued to work in the town until early in 1888. That is the year of his last trade directory entry,¹⁰ and it is also the year when his successor first advertised in the local press. Mowll moved on: through the 1890s he ran a studio at 174 Broad Street, Birmingham,¹¹ where he built up a distinguished clientele, and he eventually retired to Long Ashton in Somerset.¹²

Meanwhile, the London Road studio's new occupant announced his presence in May 1888.

Charles E. Weale, (Late E. B. Mowll,) Portrait, Landscape and Architectural Photographer, 4 London Road, King's Lynn. Copies may be obtained from all negatives taken by Mr. Mowll. Price List may be had on application.¹³

The self-description ('Portrait, Landscape and Architectural Photographer') was exactly that used by Mowll, and the references to Mowll and the availability of his negatives suggest an intention to profit from the goodwill and provide a continuity of service.

Charles Edward Weale was the son of another Charles Edward Weale, and both were photographers. The father had worked for some years as an accountant in Leicester¹⁴ before opening a studio in Tamworth in Staffordshire during the first half of the 1880s.¹⁵ Census returns and trade directories show him still there until about 1904, but by 1911 he was in Shropshire, running a studio in Diddlesbury (the town of his birth) with the assistance of two of his daughters.¹⁶ He was not, however, the family's photographic pioneer.

The younger Charles was the first of the Weales to become a photographer. Born in Madely, Shropshire, in 1860,¹⁷ he seems to have taken up the occupation around 20 years later. In 1881 he was living with his parents in Leicester and was recorded as a photographer while his father was still an accountant.¹⁸ It seems likely, therefore, that he was the Weale of Wood, Weale & Co., a studio that was active in nearby Melton Mowbray around 1880.¹⁹ (At much the same time – unfortunately, trade directories allow only imprecise dating – a Charles Edward Weale briefly ran a studio in Birmingham, at 36 Cannon Street.²⁰ This venture may have come before rather than after the Melton Mowbray partnership.)

It is fair to conclude, therefore, that when the younger Charles moved into his Lynn studio in the late 1880s, he had some useful experience behind him. He prepared for business with some enthusiasm and ordered a good supply of mounts on which to paste the portraits he expected to take. They carried (apart from the photographer's name) exactly the same wording as those used by Mowll. They identified him as a portrait, landscape and architectural photographer, they gave the studio address, they promised that 'This or any other portrait can be enlarged to any size and finished in oil, water colors (sic) or crayons', and they added, as reassurance, 'Negatives kept. Copies can always be had.' They did, however, bear a more elaborate design, with an ornate 'C.E.W.' monogram, a rich mixture of fonts, and a finely embellished pattern combining both classical lines and baroque flourishes. Early examples were printed in black on cream card, but later supplies, bearing exactly the same design, were ordered in gold on red, and gold on black. They were the statement of a photographer who intended to make his mark. But Weale ordered too many of the last batch, for he was seriously ill.

His press advertisement first appeared in May 1888, and it ran until May of the following year. His only trade directory entry was for an 1890 edition,²¹ which was probably compiled in 1889. By the spring of 1890 he had been forced to return to the family home in Tamworth, where, on May 31st, he died. The death certificate recorded his profession as 'Photographer, Master', and it identified his fatal illness as 'Tubercular Phthisis,

Asphyxia.²² He was 30 years old, and the informant was his father, the older Charles, who had been present at the death. Weale must have been ill for most, if not all of his time in Lynn.

His successor, John Henry Hall, took possession of a substantial stock of unused mounts along with the studio.

Hall came originally from Wellingborough in Northamptonshire. After a period as a tobacco pipe manufacturer in Walsoken,²³ he had taken up photography some time after 1881. The first evidence of him at London Road comes from a Lynn almanac for 1891, compiled during the previous year.

John H. Hall, Photographic Artist, 4 London Road, King's Lynn. Photography in all its branches. Enlargements taken and finished in Oil or Water Colours to any size. Frames made to order.²⁴

He was also recorded at the studio, aged 40 and living with his wife, Clarissa, by the 1891 census.²⁵

Hall had inherited a stock of Weale's old mounts and he was not inclined to waste them. He simply had his name stamped on the front and the word 'Late' added above and to the left of Weale's name. Hall's economising has unfortunately been the cause of some confusion in later years. Since his over-stamped additions have sometimes faded, his customisation of Weale's cards can easily be overlooked, and there are cases where, even in an archived collection, Hall's work has been mistakenly attributed to his predecessor.²⁶ Eventually, however, much of the surplus stock was used up and, for cabinet prints at least, Hall was able to invest in mounts that proclaimed his name alone and featured a picture of the old Greyfriars' Tower,²⁷ which was a nearby landmark and was visible (in those days²⁸) from his front door. It seems fair to assume that confusion arose only for later generations looking back at his photographs. At the time, he was simply following two practices that were not uncommon amongst new photographers: he was thriftily overprinting old stock, and he was seeking to benefit from such goodwill as had been earned by the previous practitioner.

It may be, though, that he soon came to believe he had identified himself too closely with his predecessor. Weale, after all, had enjoyed little opportunity to build up a reputation. Evidence for second thoughts comes from Hall's advertisement in the 1892 *Lynn Almanack*. In all respects but one, the wording was the same as for the previous year, but after 'John H. Hall' he added '(Late E. B. Mowell)'.²⁹ ('Mowell' is a misspelling of 'Mowll' that had appeared before.)³⁰ It seems that Hall had reconsidered his association in the public mind with Weale and had decided to present himself instead as the inheritor of the earlier photographer's virtues.

Surviving portraits by Hall give some hints as to the furnishing of the London Road studio, which by this time bore witness to the tenure of five different photographers. There was a mock-stone bench and a mock-stone balustrade. These were probably bought

in the 1880s, for they had the coarsely textured, rough-hewn look that the decade's photographers preferred to the smoothly finished surfaces of the 1870s. There were at least two backcloths. (In fact, there may well have been more, since, if they could afford to, photographers liked to offer a god choice of settings.) One cloth showed an interior with a further painted and windowed room beyond. Such scenes were much in favour at the end of the 1860s, and it is even possible that Edwin Bullock had brought it with him when he moved in from St James' Street. The second backdrop showed a woodland setting, as favoured in the 1880s, and was therefore a rather more recent purchase. There were part-glimpsed, heavy-looking items of furniture embellished with carved or moulded foliage and cockle shells,³¹ and there was a single-stemmed, hexagonal-topped table that was made of dark wood and that could – for variety – be covered with a heavy cloth. A dark carved chair probably dated back to Bullock's days. A simpler bentwood chair was also available. Its open-backed style made it easier to accommodate ladies' bustles,³² and it could be made to seem more luxurious if draped with white fur³³ – an accessory that had lately become very popular.

But Hall did not spend all his time on studio portraiture. Surviving pictures include a series of shots taken of earthworks at Holme,³⁴ a group photograph of an unidentified cycling club,³⁵ and studies of ancient quern stones found near Leziate.³⁶ His stay in Lynn was relatively short, but he seems to have made a mark that eluded his immediate predecessor. It does, though, seem a pity that some of his work should have been misattributed.

Just when Hall moved on is not entirely clear. His last trade directory entry was in 1892,³⁷ but he may have stayed a little later than that, as the studio's next occupancy was probably particularly brief. His later career is not fully known, but he may have been the John Henry Hall who for a while ran a studio in Stalybridge, Cheshire, in the early 1900s.³⁸

Little is known of the next photographer to take the studio. In fact, only two pieces of evidence of his presence in Lynn have so far been discovered, and one of those is a reference to his departure. In the town's almanac for 1895 (prepared in 1894) John Smith announced that T Smith & Sons had 'taken over the Business and Premises of 4, London Road, lately carried on by Messrs. Mowll, Wheal (sic), Hall and Hewitt'.³⁹

That is it: just a surname. There were a number of photographers called Hewitt at this period. Alfred Hewitt in Huddersfield and Charles H. Hewitt in Tadcaster (and, later, Gateshead) were well settled in their careers and, perhaps, unlikely candidates. But the 1890s were also the years when Charles F., James, Joseph and several other Hewitts were engaged in professional photography. Without at least an initial, there is no hope of identifying Lynn's bearer of the name.

The second piece of evidence is a carte de visite from Hewitt's studio. The mount gives no initial, and so does nothing to help establish his identity, but it does touch on two other topics. It provides a reminder of the studio's recent history, assuring customers that 'All negatives taken by Hall, Weale and Mowll are carefully preserved & copies may be had.

Enlargements a speciality'; and it refers to Hewitt's earlier professional experience, 'late with Messrs H. P. Robinson & Son of Redhill. Awarded 80 Medals for Art Photography.'

This, on the face of it at least, was impressive. Henry Peach Robinson was one of the most eminent photographers of his day, who had won a high reputation as an art photographer, but who had maintained his studio practice and had written very readable books on the practice of photography. To be associated with Robinson would have looked good on any professional's curriculum vitae, but the matter was not actually quite that simple.

H. P. Robinson retired from running his Tunbridge Wells studio in 1868. This left his son, Ralph, with a dilemma. Ralph was an analytical chemist who, two years earlier, had given up that career to help his father run the business. Rather than try to return to his former line of work when the Kent studio closed, Ralph opened a studio in Redhill, Surrey, under the name 'H. P. Robinson & Son', and specialised in portraiture and animal photography.⁴⁰ This was where Hewitt had been employed. It need hardly be said that few, if any, of the 80 medals had been won by either Hewitt or (capable though he doubtless was) Ralph Robinson.

As already noted, the next – and last – in the succession of photographers at 4 London Road was John Smith, and for him the studio represented a useful addition to his High Street business. It came complete with the body of work accumulated since the arrival of Mowll and, on a carte mount dating from this period, Smith explained that 'All negatives taken by Hall, Weale and Mowll are carefully preserved and copies may be had.' No reference was made to Hewitt, who either took his negatives with him or accumulated no stock that seemed worth mentioning.

So, despite the serial changing of hands, some degree of continuity had been maintained. It may be, though, that Smith did not retain the extra studio for very long. Its first and last trade directory listing in his name was in 1896.⁴¹ After that, there seems to be no record of the premises operating as the studio of any photographer. The possession of a second studio facility did, however, prove vital to Smith at a critical moment in 1895, but that event will be considered in due course. For the present, the narrative needs to be picked up where it left off – in the mid-1880s.

¹ *Lynn Advertiser*, 7th February 1872.

² Paul Richards, *King's Lynn*, p135, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1990).

³ G G Coulton, *Four Score Years*, p28, (London: Readers Union, 1945).

⁴ E.g. *Burnley Express*, 26th June, 4th September, 6th November 1880.

⁵ *Burnley Express*, 17th April 1880.

⁶ Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, KILLM:1989.6.2.

⁷ Rosemary & Stan Rodliffe, *Glimpses of Fiddaman's Lynn*, (Bristol: Rodliffe Associates, 2000).

⁸ *The Graphic*, 14th August 1886.

⁹ *The Graphic*, 6th November 1886.

¹⁰ Kelly's *Directory of Norfolk*, 1888.

¹¹ C E J Aston, Michael Hallett and Joseph McKenna, *Professional Photographers in Birmingham 1842-1914*, (Royal Photographic Society, 1987)

¹² 1911 census, RG14, piece 14824, reg. district 318, enumeration district 10, schedule 96.

13 *Lynn Advertiser*, 12th May 1888.
14 1871 census: RG10, piece 3268, folio 12, page 17. 1881 census: RG11, piece 3159, folio 36, page
25.
15 Gillian Jones, *Professional Photographers in South Staffordshire, 1850-1940*, (Royal
Photographic Society, 1994).
16 1911 census: RG14, piece 16828 reg. district, enumeration district 2, schedule 135.
17 Civil Registration index of births: Madely, June 1860, volume 6a, page 589.
18 1881 census: RG11, piece 3159, folio 36, page 25.
19 Wright, *Directory of Leicestershire*, 1880
20 C E J Aston, Michael Hallett and Joseph McKenna, *Professional Photographers in Birmingham
1842-1914*, (Royal Photographic Society, 1987)
21 White, *Directory of Norfolk*, 1890.
22 GRO death certificate. June 1890, Tamworth, 6b 259.
23 1881 census: RG11, piece 1699, folio 15, page 23.
24 *Lynn News Almanack and Diary*, 1891.
25 1891 census: RG12, piece 1569, folio 104, page 17.
26 Norfolk County Library and Information Service's *Picture Norfolk* website
(www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk): PN00012116, PN00012117.
27 True's Yard Museum, accession number KLNTY2020.260b.
28 Largely obscured in the early 20th century by the new Carnegie Library.
29 *Lynn News Almanack and Diary*, 1892.
30 Kelly, *Directory of Norfolk*, 1888.
31 E.g. True's Yard Museum, accession number KLNTY2020.258.
32 E.g. True's Yard Museum, accession number KLNTY2020.259.
33 E.g. True's Yard Museum, accession number KLNTY2020.258.
34 Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, KILLM: 2007.569, 570 and 571.
35 Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, KILLM: 2008.520.
36 Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, KILLM: 2007.907.
37 Kelly, *Directory of Norfolk*, 1892.
38 Gillian & Graham Jones, *Professional Photographers in Cheshire 1849-1940*, (Royal
Photographic Society, 1995).
39 *King's Lynn Red Book*, 1895.
40 Margaret Harker, *Henry Peach Robinson, Master of Photographic Art, 1830-1901*, (Oxford: Basil
Blackwell, 1988).
41 Kelly, *Directory of Norfolk*, 1896.