

## 11. Empire building (1884-1892)

While a steady procession of occupants moved in and out of 4 London Road, the town's three firmly established photographers were attending to their growing practices.

John Smith was looking to expand his business beyond Lynn. His High Street operation was itself a branch studio, though the trunk was around 70 miles away in Brigg, North Lincolnshire. Now Smith sought to make Lynn the nucleus of his own little empire. By 1884 he had an outpost at Norwich Street in Fakenham,<sup>1</sup> and two years later he was advertising a studio just across the county border at Long Sutton in Lincolnshire.<sup>2</sup> At some point in the 80s he also opened premises in Swaffham,<sup>3</sup> though the date of that venture is not precisely established.

These branch studios may have been rather basic, and their opening times may have been quite limited, but they reflected a kind of ambition that was not uncommon among photographers who had built a solid customer base. They do not appear, however, to have lasted long. The Swaffham operation, as hard-to-date in its closing as in its opening, seems to have continued well into the 1890s;<sup>4</sup> the Long Sutton branch featured in only one edition of the *Lynn News Almanack*; and no later mention of the Fakenham studio has been found than 1887.<sup>5</sup> There is, though, plenty of evidence that Smith was keeping busy during this period and the years immediately after.

Cartes de visite still claimed a healthy share of the market, though cabinet prints were now growing in popularity, and Smith was able to command good prices for both. His cartes, from six shillings a dozen, and his cabinet portraits, from 15 shillings a dozen,<sup>6</sup> were noticeably more expensive than those of the other established studios. (At about this time, 3/6d and eight shillings were Wright's respective starting prices,<sup>7</sup> while Dexter's fees fell between the two extremes.<sup>8</sup>) But the product that Smith was particularly promoting during the later 1880s was the large framed portrait. Options ranged from modest-sized monochrome pictures in gilt frames at half a guinea up to 'Large Oil Painting in Handsome Gilt Frame' at thirty shillings. Whatever the size, twelve carte de visite copies of the portrait were thrown in for free. This offer, though, applied only to new portraits:

The Enlargements can be made from any old and fading Glass positive or C.D.V. Portrait, but as there is so much extra work in this case, no small Portraits are given in with them.<sup>9</sup>

This proviso apart, the tone was both assured and reassuring:

T. Smith & Sons respectfully solicit and inspection of their specimens, feeling sure that their Artistic Finish will meet with genuine approval. All Orders will receive careful personal attention, and if desired our clients will be able to see their Enlargements before leaving the Studios.

Smith continued to present himself as a patron of (and supplier to) the arts. Having contributed to the town's Exhibition of Trades and Inventions in 1885, he was probably interested by the advance publicity for a similar event in the autumn of 1886, since photography was one of the anticipated attractions that were listed in the local press. There was, however, no mention of photographs in the report that eventually covered the exhibition,<sup>10</sup> and it may be that Smith already had his mind set on something more resolutely artistic. He had already staged one ceramic art exhibition in 1883 and had originally intended it to be an annual occurrence. Now he took the opportunity to plan a follow-up, and in September 1887 he announced a two-week 'Competitive Ceramic Art Exhibition' that was to take place at the Athenaeum Music Hall in November. Once again, the Prince and Princess of Wales had agreed to act as patrons, and the potential rewards for participation were attractive.

Valuable Prizes will be offered for competition in over 50 different classes of Art Work. £100 is offered by Jno. Walsh Walsh, of Melbourne,<sup>11</sup> for Painting on Terra Cotta alone. Gold, Silver and Bronze Medals and other Prizes will also be competed for by artists on China, Canvas, Terra Cotta, Wood, Silvered Glass, Tapestry, Silks and Velvets, Lincrusta-Walton, Pearline, &c.; also Art Needlework, Modelling in Clay, Brass-work, &c.<sup>12</sup>

Evidently national interest was expected, since special provision was made for entrants from the Lynn area.

Local Prizes. In addition to Class 39 in prospectus, Prizes will be offered for competition for Paintings on Crystoleum, also Oil and Water Colours on any basis. The visitors to the exhibition will record their votes in these classes to declare winners.

Admission was one shilling (or sixpence after 6 pm), season tickets were half-a-crown, and the hall was open from 10 in the morning until 10 at night. Visitors may have come from far beyond the town. They were expected, at least, for Smith was able to inform the public that 'The Railway Companies have kindly consented to charge Special Cheap Fares for the Exhibition.'<sup>13</sup>

The occasion was a success, as the *Lynn Advertiser* reported.

The second North-West Norfolk fine art exhibition by professional and amateur artists was opened in the Music Hall, Athenaeum (for 14 days) on Wednesday last, and Messrs. Smith & Sons, the promoters, are to be congratulated upon the successful result of their efforts, and the excellence of the show which they are enabled to hold.<sup>14</sup>

Some sections of the exhibition elicited a lukewarm response from the reporter. ('The terra cotta painting is quite an attractive feature of the show, but the painting on plaques is very poor.') But the photographic exhibits won the paper's approval.

There is a keen competition between the professional and the amateur photographers, and the display made by them will stand the test of keen criticism.

Unfortunately, the report failed to identify the professionals in question, but the two different worlds of professional and amateur were something that Smith was becoming very aware of. Amateur photography was still the province of the relatively moneyed classes, but it was a hobby that was about to become more accessible and to grow faster. In 1888 George Eastman began to market the Kodak No. 1, the world's first box camera, which used gelatine-coated paper-backed film rather than glass plates. Then, in 1890, he introduced celluloid film. Eastman's cameras had sealed-in film for factory processing, but there was still a generation of amateurs who took their hobby seriously and who wished to develop and print their own photographs. It was to them that, in May 1889, Smith decided to appeal.

To Amateur Photographers, Prevent Waste and Save Months of Study. The season when Amateur photographers will be afield has now arrived, and T. Smith & Sons are prepared to offer Photographic Apparatus, Drop Plates and every requisite for the production of first-class work, at the lowest remunerative prices for cash. A few valuable hints from a Professional Photographer saves endless waste and months of study, which T. Smith & Sons will always be happy to give Gratis to all purchasers. Every article sold will be of the best possible quality, and all apparatus thoroughly tested before delivery.<sup>15</sup>

This announcement was twice repeated, but its third appearance coincided with an advertisement by William Palmer, a chemist with branches at 12 and 92 Norfolk Street. Whether or not he realised it, Smith had been treading on the chemist's toes, for Palmer had been supplying the amateur market for some time and had been listed as a photographic supplier in the *British Journal of Photography*.<sup>16</sup> His lengthy advertisement set out his stall in some detail.

Amateur Photography. Cameras, Tripods, Lamps, Lenses, Plate Boxes, Printing Frames, Burnishers, Cutting and Vignetting Glasses, Porcelain and Ebonite Trays, Glass Measures, &c. A large variety in stock, at makers' prices. Pyro. Acid, per oz., 1/2; Chloride Gold, 15gr., 2/. Ammonia 880, Oxalate Potash, Hydro-quinone, Meta-bisulphite, in stock, at lowest prices. Sensitized paper, Double Album, per sh., 9d; ready cut, cab. 50, 2/3. Dry Plates. Ilford, Richmond, Derwent, Fry's, Thomas, in stock, at makers' prices. Any make obtained to order. Mounts of all sizes and colour, gold-edged or plain. Complete Photo Outfit from £1. Best quality Artists' Brushes and Oil Colours, Samples can be seen, "done by amateurs," on Eastman's, Morgan and Kidd's Bromide, Argentotype and Transferotype Paper. Also Opals, Platina, Pizzighilli, Carbon Printing, Lantern Slides and Enlarging.<sup>17</sup>

There was also a darkroom for the use of amateurs, and copies of the rules of the King's Lynn Amateur Photographic Society could be provided on request. The list of products is

staggering, and it includes a number of largely forgotten terms. (Opals, for instance, were sheets of translucent white glass on which images could be printed, and Pizzighilli was a brand of sensitised paper.) The diversity serves now as a reminder that photography could be a complicated activity. In 1899 it served as a reminder to Smith that the amateur market was already being comprehensively served. Lest there should be any doubt, Palmer added:

Valuable hints can be given to amateurs wishing to try any of the above, by one who has done work in all the above processes. W.J.P. having now supplied amateurs for several years, and having seen a great quantity of their work, can at a glance tell where mistakes have been made, – mistakes sometimes that professionals would not have thought possible. Instructions can be given which will enable amateurs to avoid the pitfalls next time, and soon become adepts at the art.

Smith, with knuckles duly rapped, dropped his advertisement. Palmer continued with his. Smith went on stocking ‘Photographic Apparatus by all Recognised Makers’,<sup>18</sup> but only once more did he presume to address the amateur customer directly, and on that occasion he appealed to a segment of the market over which Palmer could claim no special rights by offering his ‘Dark room at service of European tourists’.<sup>19</sup>

In the more traditional fields of professional business, however, he maintained a varied offering. His portfolio included ‘Instantaneous Photography. Artistic Photography, Pretty Homelike Pictures, Angling, Bicycle, Cricketing, &c., Groups, Dainty Miniatures’,<sup>20</sup> and he published a ‘Splendid Series of Scrap and Framed Photographs of King’s Lynn and all parts of Norfolk and Lincolnshire, not surpassed.’<sup>21</sup> He could also, like any good photographer, respond to the unexpected.

One such opportunity – widely covered by the British press - came in December 1889, when the steamer *Wick Bay* approached Lynn with a 2,300-ton cargo of oilcake and maize from the United States. ‘During her passage she had encountered bad weather in the Atlantic,’ the *Shields Daily Gazette* reported, ‘and had her poop rail and stanchion carried away, and her dead lights in the cabin on the portside stove in by the sea, filling the berths in the saloon cabin’.<sup>22</sup> Battered, but still seaworthy, the ship anchored in the Lynn Roads on Friday 19<sup>th</sup>, and next day took on board the pilot who was to guide her through the tricky channels of the Wash. The weather was calm and, for two hours, all went well, but then, changing course to pass another vessel and carried by a surge of the flood tide, she ran aground on the White Buoy Knock Sand<sup>23</sup> (a bank described by an early navigation manual as ‘narrow and dangerous’).<sup>24</sup> The captain and crew remained on board while a tug tried unsuccessfully to pull the ship free, but it became clear that the *Wick Bay* was taking on more water with each successive tide. The climax, as recounted by the *Lincoln Mercury*, came on the Sunday evening.

Whilst the crew were partaking of their suppers they heard a tremendous crash, and upon going on deck found that their vessel had parted amidships. They took to their boats and were rescued by some vessels that were in the vicinity and

brought up to Lynn. The daylight of Monday revealed the fact that the *Wick Bay* had become a total wreck, and efforts were attempted to remove portions of the cargo, but owing to the rapid breaking up of the vessel this had to be abandoned.<sup>25</sup>

John Smith was not the only person to recognise that the wreck represented a photo-opportunity. So, too, did Jasper Wright – and, perhaps others. Having arranged for someone to ferry them and their equipment to Knock Sand, several miles out into the Wash, photographers found the ship broken cleanly in two, with several yards of sandbank separating the sections, and attempts at salvage work in progress. Both Smith and Wright secured effective (and quite similar) shots which must have made a strong impact at the time, but Smith's pictures also won themselves an afterlife. Fourteen years later, in 1903, two of his *Wick Bay* images would be used to illustrate an article on wrecks and salvage in the *London Magazine*.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, one of these pictures was subjected to one further process and has survived in the form of a hand-coloured glass lantern slide.<sup>27</sup> Its acquired sunset hues detract from the starkness of the outline, but the sections of hull emerge dramatically against the skyline, a small group of figures balances in silhouette on one sloping segment of the ship, and two more men stand on the sand between the halves and draw the viewer's attention to the width of the gap. (The salvage attempts, incidentally, spread over the next four years and the costs were not fully paid off until after the Second World War.)<sup>28</sup>

In his role of supporter of the arts Smith also kept up the high profile he had established at the beginning of his Lynn career. He sold artists' materials ('Artists' Oil Colours in Tubes from 2d each'),<sup>29</sup> and in 1889 he reminded art students and amateur painters of Raphael Tuck & Sons' Competitive Prize Exhibition, which offered '£525 in Prizes and 200 Diplomas of Merit to be awarded by the Judges, Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., R.A., and Others'.<sup>30</sup> Particulars were available from 'T, Smith & Sons, Photographers and Fine Art Dealers', who were 'the sole Agents for King's Lynn'.

At the King's Lynn Trades and Industries Exhibition of 1891 Smith figured both as exhibitor and as artistic arbiter. His studio took a trade stall, showing 'sundry large photographs',<sup>31</sup> but John Smith also served as judge of photography in the Fine Art competitive class. In this capacity he awarded a Certificate of Merit to A. J. Bridges for 'photographs on mounts' and a Highly Commended to S. Tabraham of Wisbech, who had entered a selection of both photographs and geometrical designs. Other Lynn studios appear not to have participated in the event, but the work of several nearby professionals was represented. There were photographs by F. W. Ralph of Dersingham (whose father combined running a studio with working at Sandringham House);<sup>32</sup> and there were pictures by several practitioners from Wisbech – John Kennerell, Hardingham Mehew, Lawrence Brown and Alfred Drysdale. (It was at this exhibition, incidentally, that the teenage Walter Dexter – son of photographer Walter Sothern Dexter – won a Bronze medal for an oil painting and a Certificate of Merit for an etching. He went on to become a painter of some note.)

These years were ostensibly good years for Smith (though there was one business difficulty that he had to face in 1886, and that will be returned to later in this chapter.) He

had successfully positioned himself as photographic artist and art-friendly photographer, he was attracting custom from the worthies of the town, including three-times mayor Frederick Savage,<sup>33</sup> and he was beginning to hint at even grander clients than hitherto. Some photographic mounts boasting ‘Highly Distinguished Patronage’ certainly date from the mid-1880s, but there were other mounts from these years that went further in their claims, featuring the Prince of Wales’ plumes or the phrase ‘Under Royal Patronage’. One batch of mounts even went so far as to depict the full heraldic assembly of badge, crown, lion, unicorn and motto. But Smith was never granted a royal warrant, and no evidence has yet been found of him photographing royal subjects during these years. Perhaps he felt the Prince of Wales’ patronage of the exhibitions he promoted was enough to justify hints of royal employment. Not until the next century, however, can we be sure that he took pictures of members of the royal family, and that occasion belongs to a later chapter.

The turn of the decade brought changes to the management of the Smith studio. In 1888 Thomas Smith, John’s father, died<sup>34</sup> and his mother became head of the family operations. For a while, Smith continued to run the studio for her, while retaining the name of T Smith & Sons.<sup>35</sup> Then, in about 1892, he took over the Lynn business in his own right,<sup>36</sup> though still without changing the trading name.

Meanwhile, at 125 London Road, Jasper had succeeded Robert Wright, and he was inclined to seek a slightly higher profile than his father had. In 1886 he decided to place a half-page advertisement in the forthcoming local yearbook.<sup>37</sup> In this he sought a little grandeur for his premises by referring to them as the ‘East Anglian Studio’, and he identified some of his selling points:

All photographs taken by the instantaneous process. Children’s portraiture a Special Feature. Life-like portraits guaranteed. A trial solicited. A choice assortment of Photo Frames, Albums, and other Fancy Goods.’

The fancy goods, which had remained important during his father’s early photographic career, were now relegated to little more than a footnote. But what was perhaps more interesting was the emphasis on children’s portraits. Many early professionals had been unenthusiastic about photographing fidgety children, but by this time exposures were down to less than a second and the problem was much reduced. Nevertheless, the studio could still be a daunting place for the young, and there remained some business advantage in specialising in this branch of photography. Wright was only in his mid-twenties and his own first child had not yet been born – though she may have been on the way. So the decision to make a play for this section of the market was probably quite a bold one.

Certainly, Jasper had an eye for an opportunity, as his visit to the wreck of the *Wick Bay* has already indicated, and as was shown by his attempt to court Mart visitors in 1888 with that rarest of phenomena, a Wright newspaper announcement.

During the Mart. For First-Class Photographs, go to J. J. Wright's, East Anglian Studio, 125, London Road, King's Lynn. Carte de Visite 3/6 per dozen. Cabinets 8/ per dozen. The Studio is fitted with all the latest appliances and accessories for the production of first-class portraiture. Satisfaction guaranteed. See specimens.<sup>38</sup>

Then, in the 1889 Lynn almanac, he graduated to a full page advertisement.<sup>39</sup> A good proportion of the copy was much as before: he promised 'first-class' portraits; he mentioned that he specialised in children's photos, adding that there was 'No extra charge'; his fees were unchanged (with 'Reprints from previous sittings at Same Price'); he still invited prospective customers to examine examples of his work and he still guaranteed satisfaction. In addition, it transpired, he had been investing further in the business, 'Having made extensive alterations and improvements in the finishing departments and secured the most modern appliances for the rapid execution of all orders'. There was, too, a new heading for his advertisement:

"Preserve the Shadow ere the Substance fail."

This was a quotation – or, to be more precise, a misquotation – from a couplet much favoured by the very earliest photographers. The original lines were 'Secure the Shadow, Ere the Substance Fade, Let Nature imitate what Nature made', and they were often used with specific reference to post-mortem pictures, but Wright's more general application of the concept to photography as a whole was not inappropriate. Preserving the shadow was just what photography did.

Like Smith, Wright was keen to build his own little empire. By 1886 he had opened a second studio in Station Road, Fakenham, opposite the Bell Inn,<sup>40</sup> and this continued to be advertised until 1909.<sup>41</sup> He also ran short-lived ventures in Long Sutton,<sup>42</sup> just across the county border in Lincolnshire, and in Downham Market.<sup>43</sup> (The Long Sutton studio may be the same as the alleged studio in Sutton Bridge, which was referred to, perhaps mistakenly, in his 1940 obituary.<sup>44</sup>) More branches were to follow towards the turn of the century.

Walter Sothern Dexter, too, was presiding over a growing business, but his growth was of a different kind. Fancy goods had long featured in the family's trading, and in June 1889 the chance arose to boost this side of the business.

In Bankruptcy. Re T. Farrow. W. Dexter has purchased from the Official Receiver the Immense Stock of Stationery, Fancy Goods, &c. Must be Cleared at Great Reduction, Sale Shortly at Blackfriars Street and Norfolk Street.<sup>45</sup>

It had all happened very quickly. On May 31<sup>st</sup> Thomas Farrow, a bookseller and stationer of Railway Road had filed for bankruptcy.<sup>46</sup> The date set for the public hearing at Lynn's court house was June 21<sup>st</sup>,<sup>47</sup> and a week later Dexter had bought up the stock and was advertising it in the *Lynn Advertiser*. His description of the stock as 'immense' was clearly justified, for a new shop was needed to accommodate it, and a new, double-fronted<sup>48</sup> shop was duly found.

W. S. Dexter, Blackfriars Street, Lynn, will shortly remove his Stock (the largest and most varied in the Eastern Counties,) of Fancy Goods, Baskets, Stationery, Toys, &c, to 109 High Street, Next Door to the Post Office. The Bankrupt Stock of Mr. T. Farrow, Railway road and Norfolk street, will shortly be offered at exceedingly Low Prices.<sup>49</sup>

The studio, meanwhile, was to stay where it was: 'Photography and Picture framing in all its branches will still be carried on at Blackfriars Street.'

Dexter's prices at this time were cheaper than Smith's but more expensive than Wright's. Prospective clients wishing to make comparisons needed, however, to engage in a little mental arithmetic, for Dexter adopted the habit of quoting for six rather than twelve copies: 'C.D.V.s 2/6, Cabinets 6/6 the half-dozen'.<sup>50</sup> A willingness to draw attention to the possibility of smaller orders may, of course, have carried its own advantages.

Dexter now had two shops, each with its own speciality, though the boundary lines were sometimes a little blurred. Advertisements during the autumn of 1889 indicate that some of the bankrupt stock was, for a time at least, still kept at Blackfriars Street, to be sold off there, while some advertisements from the early 1890s show that photograph albums and scenic views were on sale in the High Street premises. The bulk of Dexter's advertising budget in the late eighties and early nineties seems to have been devoted to the London Road shop, with the studio sometimes mentioned briefly at the bottom of an announcement concerned mainly with fancy goods. This may indicate that photography was taking second place, or it may mean that the studio business was well enough established to look after itself. The fact that one advertisement featured 'Poulton's and Valentine's views of Lynn and district'<sup>51</sup> suggests that Dexter was not marketing his own topographical work at this time.

It may be, too, that the Blackfriars Street address was coming to be seen as less of an advantage. Dexter's parents had made a habit of referring to their studio's closeness to the Athenaeum – a closeness that put it at the very heart of Lynn's artistic and cultural life. But the Athenaeum had now passed its heyday. In 1883 a large part of the building had been taken over by the post office, and though its traditional activities continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prestige of the Athenaeum had perhaps dwindled. So, although the town's cultural centre had been the Dexters' point of reference ever since they moved into Blackfriars Street, it no longer held its old associations. In February 1890 Walter Dexter broke with tradition in an advertisement for 'Instantaneous Photography' and 'Picture framing in all styles and prices' by giving the studio address as 'Blackfriars Street, Lynn. (Near the Post Office)'.<sup>52</sup> In subsequent notices, this became his routine way of giving the studio's location. (The High Street shop had also been described in terms of its proximity to the post office. Possible confusion is dispelled by noting that there was a small post office branch at 108 High Street, but that the main post and telegraphy office was in the Athenaeum building.)

Smith, Wright and Dexter were not the only photographers seeking to grow their business. Lynn also caught the attention of the biggest photographic empire of all, which was always looking to expand its reach.

A. & G. Taylor had studios the length and breadth of Britain and at one point, around 1880, they were also active in Paris and several cities in the United States. About 70 locations have been identified as bases for their operations in the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and 40 or more of these studios were active in the mid-1880s. They boasted royal clients, but their primary target was the mass market. In East Anglia, however, they made few inroads, and the nearest studio to Lynn was probably one they occupied briefly in Cambridge in the early 1890s.<sup>53</sup> So their Cambridge business still lay in the future when, in 1886, they placed an advertisement in the *Lynn Advertiser*. A conveniently sited studio was not, however, a necessary ingredient of their system.

George Taylor, who – rather than his brother Andrew – seems to have been the company's driving force, pioneered the photographic use of the club system, which was effectively a form of hire purchase.<sup>54</sup> The key product was the Excelsior portrait, a 10 x 8 inch enlargement, coloured in oils, mounted and framed. This was offered, along with a dozen cartes de visite from the same negative, for 30 shillings.

It was an attractive price, which was kept down by the application of factory methods to the centrally-managed processing. An average day at the brothers' Forest Hill works saw the production of 280 enlargements. 'There are no less than twenty-four lenses in use, and, in consequence, twenty-four enlarging stands,' reported a visitor in the early 1880s, who went on to see a 'series of printing rooms, mounting rooms, sorting rooms &c,' before estimating that the establishment gave work to 'between five and six hundred employees'.<sup>55</sup> Despite the relatively low cost, the Excelsior was a product that would normally have been beyond the financial reach of the average customer; but the Taylors allowed buyers to pay the bill a little at a time, week by week. The company had battalions of canvassers, who went from house to house drumming up custom in the first instance, and who then made regular visits to collect instalments as they became due.

This system meant that the company could operate well outside the natural catchment areas of its studios. Indeed, one photographer complained that the firm was canvassing 'in all provincial towns throughout the country, where you find their satellites actively at work in every railway station, market place, post-office, police station and all descriptions of workshops' as well as combing residential districts.<sup>56</sup> If enough orders were received from a targeted area, Taylor could send in a team of photographers to set up a temporary studio and take the necessary pictures. A frequently preferred option, however, was to approach an established local practitioner and invite him to take the photographs, print up the twelve cartes, and pass the negative on to A. & G. Taylor, who would produce, colour and frame the enlargement at one of their London factories. Prices offered to the local photographers were low, but the alternative for them was to forgo the business altogether and either see it go to a nearby competitor or watch a squad of Taylor's employees arrive in town and go into action.

It was the Excelsior portrait, with its attendant club system, that the photographic giant introduced to the Lynn market in 1886.

A. & G. Taylor, Photographers to the Queen & the Prince and Princess of Wales, beg to call special attention to their New Subscription System by which their far-famed and highly-prized 30/- Excelsior and 1 Dozen Vignette Portraits can be easily obtained by payment of 1/- per week. Agent and Collector for Lynn and District – Mr. George Robertson, 14, Windsor Terrace, who will be pleased to shew specimens and give every information.<sup>57</sup>

This was followed by a word of warning:

Caution. Messrs. A. & G. T. caution the public against spurious imitations and people using their name without authority.

Such concern with the unauthorised use of names was perhaps a little hypocritical. Photographers could be over-zealous in their exploitation, for publicity purposes, of real or imagined royal patronage, and attempts to prevent unjustified claims had ended in court two years earlier, when the Taylors had found themselves the targets of a test case. They were prosecuted for unauthorised use of the Royal Arms and, though the resulting fine was derisory, they were obliged to remove the arms from studio fronts and from stationery. (They were, in due course, granted a Royal Warrant, but this was not until October 1886, five months after the launch of their Lynn campaign.)<sup>58</sup>

A certain touchiness about false representation was nevertheless understandable. Field representatives were vital to the Taylors' expansion, and new recruits were always required. (The Lynn advertisement ended with a note that canvassers were 'wanted on commission and salary.') The commission – five shillings on a thirty-shilling order – was quite generous, but its full payment depended on the customer fully clearing the debt. Canvassers were, therefore, often tempted to devise their own schemes for improving their income. Some collected payments for pictures that had been taken and then disappeared without handing the money over to their employers; others chose the speedier option of simply taking deposits and vanishing without any pictures having been taken at all. Sometimes the fraudsters pretended to represent local photographers, aiming perhaps to play on goodwill that would be less likely to extend to outsiders. As a result, A. & G. Taylor, local professionals and trusting customers could all on occasion find themselves victims.

It is clear that some such fraud happened in Lynn. The evidence is, unfortunately, very thin, and no news or court reports have been found to fill in the gaps. But a series of advertisements does provide some hints as to what occurred.

It is not known how long the Taylors maintained a canvassing presence in the town. Their advertisement in May 1886 would have been enough to kick-start their operation, but an extended newspaper campaign was not necessary for what was essentially a door-to-door

exercise. Three weeks after their advertisement appeared, however, it became clear that something had changed. John Smith had also decided to try the club system. He may have been using the instalment plan for some time, or he may have adopted it in response to the new competition from outside the town. It is even possible that the Taylors' representative, George Robertson, approached him with the suggestion for a counter-offensive. That would explain Smith's advertisement of June 5<sup>th</sup>.

T, Smith and Sons, Photographers, 60, High Street, King's Lynn, beg to caution the public against anyone calling and representing themselves as agents or canvassers for the above firm without their authority. Mr. Robertson, Windsor road, and Mr Thompson, Gaywood road, are their only authorised representatives, they having no connection whatsoever with any other firm.<sup>59</sup>

Somebody, it seems, had been trying to trade on Smith's reputation. A. & G. Taylor were canvassing in the town at the time, and Robertson had been their representative. But Robertson had now switched employers (or claimed to have done so). Either Thompson was already working for Smith, or he had been introduced by Robertson. Whichever was the case, the two canvassers were soon acting together against Smith's interests. For all one can tell, Robertson could have still been playing the Taylors along, too. If so, however, he seems to have been quickly found out, for, a week after Smith's warning, they were seeking a new representative.

Messrs. A. & G. Taylor require a Collector for Lynn and District. Must be good canvasser and of good character. Write to Manager, Country Department, 70, Queen Victoria Street, London.<sup>60</sup>

Smith eventually discovered that Robertson and Thompson were cheating him, but not before several months had passed. (The apparent lack of any ensuing court case suggests that the pair had made a successful escape from the area.) He did not immediately abandon the canvassing system. By this time there must have been debts that could still be, in part at least, retrieved. He did, though, name the offenders and appoint a new official representative in their place. He even went to the trouble of inserting this notice in both Lynn papers, even though the *Lynn News* was a paper much less favoured by photographers for their announcements

T. Smith and Sons, photographers, 60, High Street, King's Lynn, give notice that Geo. Robertson and Jas. Thompson, their late Canvassers, are no longer in their employ. – Mr. Wm. Blyth will in future receive all payments on our behalf.<sup>61</sup>

A week later he issued a further warning to the public against unauthorised canvassers using his name.<sup>62</sup>

A. & G. Taylor had not quite given up on West Norfolk. In the following spring they advertised again for 'A sharp business-like man to canvas and collect on Messrs. A. & G. Taylor's business in Lynn District.'<sup>63</sup> The required qualifications – 'Good character and

security for £50' – suggested that a mere show of virtue was no longer enough to gain the brothers' trust. They placed no more advertisements.

Some customers may well have ended up out of pocket, and it seems clear that the Taylors were also swindled by Robertson. There is no doubt, however, about the loss sustained and felt by John Smith, who later described the events as 'a systematic course of robbery by two employees'.<sup>64</sup> In the mid-eighties, he may have seen this experience as an unpleasant intrusion into an otherwise flourishing career; a quarter of a century later, he would look back on it as the first link in a chain of misfortunes.

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- 1 *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1885.
  - 2 *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1887.
  - 3 Carte de visite mount from the 1880s.
  - 4 Swaffham is mentioned on carte mounts, including one showing leg-of-mutton sleeves.
  - 5 *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1887.
  - 6 *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1885, 1886 and 1887.
  - 7 *Lynn Advertiser*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1888 and *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1889.
  - 8 *Lynn Advertiser*, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1890.
  - 9 *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1886.
  - 10 *Lynn Advertiser*, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1886.
  - 11 Presumably Melbourne, Derbyshire, rather than Melbourne, Australia.
  - 12 *Lynn Advertiser*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1887.
  - 13 *Lynn Advertiser*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1887.
  - 14 Ibid.
  - 15 *Lynn Advertiser*, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1889.
  - 16 *British Journal of Photography*, 1888, page 64.
  - 17 *Lynn Advertiser*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1889.
  - 18 *Lynn Advertiser*, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1889.
  - 19 Ibid.
  - 20 *Lynn Advertiser*, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1889.
  - 21 *Lynn Advertiser*, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1889.
  - 22 *Shields Daily Gazette and Shipping Telegraph*, 30<sup>th</sup> December 1889.
  - 23 *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1889.
  - 24 *New and Extensive Sailing Directions for the Navigation of the North Sea*, J W Norie, p53, (London: J W Norie & Co., 1823).
  - 25 *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1899.
  - 26 F. T. Conway, *Dredged Up*, *London Magazine* volume XL, number 61, 1903.
  - 27 True's Yard Museum, accession number KLNTY2020.416.
  - 28 Stephen Worfolk, *The SS Wick Bay*, (King's Lynn, True's Yard Museum, 1992).
  - 29 *Lynn Advertiser*, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1889)
  - 30 *Lynn Advertiser*, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1889.
  - 31 *Lynn Advertiser*, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1891.
  - 32 Frances Dimond, *Developing the Picture: Queen Alexandra and the Art of Photography*, (Royal Collection Publications, 2004), page 58.
  - 33 Norfolk Museums' Photo Norfolk collection, 3012906594296.
  - 34 Civil registration of deaths index: September 1888, volume 7a, page 371, Glanford Brigg,
  - 35 *Lynn Advertiser*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1911.
  - 36 1892 according to *Lynn Advertiser*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1911, but 1894 according to *Lynn Advertiser*, 8<sup>th</sup> September 1911.
  - 37 *Lynn News Almanack and Diary*, 1887.
  - 38 *Lynn Advertiser*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1888.
  - 39 *Lynn News Almanack and Diary*, 1889.
  - 40 *Lynn News Almanack and Diary*, 1887.

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- 41 *Sconce's Illustrated Almanack, King's Lynn*, 1909.  
42 *Lynn News Almanack and Diary*, 1889.  
43 *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk*, 1892.  
44 *Lynn Advertiser*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1940.  
45 *Lynn Advertiser*, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1889.  
46 *London Gazette*, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1889, page 45.  
47 *London Gazette*, 7<sup>th</sup> June 1889, page 39.  
48 Martin Scott, *King's Lynn High Street History*: <https://kingslynn-history.uk>  
49 *Lynn Advertiser*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1889.  
50 *Lynn Advertiser*, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1890 (and subsequently).  
51 *Lynn Advertiser*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1893.  
52 *Lynn Advertiser*, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1890.  
53 Osman, Colin, *Studios of A & G Taylor* (Royal Photographic Society, *PhotoHistorian* Supplement 111, 1996).  
54 Here and in the following paragraphs (except where otherwise indicated), I am indebted for details of the Taylors' business practises to two works by Audrey Linkman: *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, pp94-99, (Tauris Parke, 1993), and *The Photographic Multiple in the Nineteenth Century*, p16, (Royal Photographic Society, *PhotoHistorian* 110, 1996).  
55 Henry Baden Pritchard, *The Photographic Studios of Europe*, (Piper and Carter, 1882).  
56 W Turner, letter to *The British Journal of Photography*, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1884.  
57 *Lynn Advertiser*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1886.  
58 Frances Dimond and Roger Taylor, *Crown and Camera, The Royal Family and Photography*, pp211-213, (Penguin, 1987).  
59 *Lynn Advertiser*, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1886.  
60 *Lynn Advertiser*, 12<sup>th</sup> June 1886.  
61 *Lynn Advertiser*, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1886, and *Lynn News*, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1886.  
62 *Lynn Advertiser*, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1886.  
63 *Lynn Advertiser*, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1877.  
64 *Lynn Advertiser*, 8<sup>th</sup> September 1911.