

15. Working for Wright (1898-1900)

Early on the afternoon of Saturday 30th July 1898¹ a slim, fresh-faced 19-year-old in a bowler hat² presented himself at 125 London Road. He had set out from Rugby early that morning and changed trains at Market Harborough. While waiting there for his connection he had chatted for a while with his older brother, Gulliver, who had left his photographic studio in the town for a quick meeting. Now, at 1.30, the young man had arrived at Jasper Wright's home and studio, only to find that Wright was out – probably attending to the Swaffham studio, which was regularly opened for the town's Saturday market.

So, having first made himself known to Wright's wife, Emma, he set off in search of somewhere to stay and quickly found lodgings, just a few minutes' walk away, with Mrs Eliza Pratt in All Saints' Street. He then called back at the studio, to which Wright had returned, and met the man who would be his employer for the best part of the next two years.

Wright certainly needed a capable assistant with some understanding of the business. His Lynn studio was well established and he had branches at Swaffham, Hunstanton and Fakenham. Earlier studios in Downham Market³ and Long Sutton⁴ were no longer in operation, but the Fakenham business had been running since the mid 1880s⁵ and the ventures in Swaffham⁶ and Hunstanton⁷ had quite recently been launched. The studios were not all open on every working day, but there was a clear need of someone able to manage one location while Wright was busy at another.

He had employees and he had family, but he lacked a potential manager. His younger members of staff might reasonably be seen as inexperienced, and his other employee, as will be seen, would have experienced communication problems as the public face of the studio. For many photographers, family members proved ideal stand-ins, as Wright himself had been during his father's absence in 1881⁸; but Wright's children were still too young – Levina, the oldest, was eleven – and there is no evidence of Emma being engaged in the business. With six small children, a seventh on the way⁹, and, probably, only one young girl as servant, she had much to occupy her.

Despite his youth, the young man in the bowler hat was the perfect solution to Wright's problem. Born in 1879, James Speight was the youngest member of a family of photographers.¹⁰ His father, Edward Hall Speight, had established his studio in Rugby in the early 1870s, and his older brothers were all active as photographers: Gulliver in Market Harborough, Edward in Dorset, George William Clare in Nuneaton, Charles in Kettering and Harry in Leamington. Like them, James had learned the trade in the family business before broadening his experience elsewhere. By July 1898, in addition to helping in his brothers' studios, he had already spent a year working for Herbert Whitlock in West Bromwich and a further two months as assistant to Walter Davey of Harrogate, who had had judged him lacking in 'experience in lighting and posing'. Now, after a brief return to Rugby, he had been engaged as Wright's assistant, with particular responsibility for the Swaffham and Hunstanton studios.

His leaving for Lynn had been marked by a Speight family tradition – a light-hearted ‘jape’ photo. To commemorate this latest farewell, James had been posed with hat, scarf, gloves and bag in front of the studio’s woodland backcloth, where he was joined by two young female members of staff, who mimed their desolation at his departure. His arrival in Lynn had proved a rather lower-key affair than his departure from Rugby, but now Wright was back at the studio and introductions could be made.

It was, by this time, quite late in the day, but as well as meeting Wright, the new assistant made the acquaintance of Mr Turner the retoucher. ‘He is about thirty-five and very deaf,’ wrote Speight in his diary that night. Not until the new working week began was he introduced to ‘my fellow workers Miss Porter and Miss Hammond’.

Mr Turner has not been identified. Turner was not an uncommon name in Lynn, and the lack of a first name, plus some allowance for latitude in Speight’s estimate of his age, leads to an unhelpfully long list of candidates, none of whom seems to have been employed in photography in a census year. The women, however, can be identified with some certainty. Margaret Hammond was much the same age as Speight and seems still to have been living in the family home in Church Street, though she would later move out into lodgings at the Foul Anchor Inn in Boal Street.¹¹ She was the Maggie Hammond who, three years earlier, had witnessed the drowning of Jasper Wright’s trainee, fourteen-year-old Ernest Bouch, in the River Nar.¹² Florence Porter was a year younger than Margaret and James, and she lived with her parents in Austin Street.¹³ Both (if their 1900 entries in Speight’s autograph album are taken as evidence) were young women of some spirit: Florence signed herself ‘Leader of the Band’, and Maggie, in a pre-feminist age, wrote the pithy observation:

The world has a short memory for a man’s sins. It’s only with women that it lays them by like wine, to ripen and mature.

This, then, was the Lynn studio staff when Speight arrived in the town. At some point a lad, Lewis Reeve, was taken on as trainee, but no reference to his employment has been found before April 1900. In the 1901 census he was recorded as a ‘photographer’s apprentice’, but, as will be recalled, this term was used loosely to mean ‘most junior employee’. Whatever his precise status, however, Reeve was there to learn the trade, and this, according to a self-improvement and careers guide of the time, might be expected to take four years, during which time his weekly wage would increase from three or four shillings to about ten shillings.¹⁴

Other assistants may, of course, have been employed at the branch studios on the days they were open.

As for the studios themselves, Swaffham was a Saturday operation but appears to have done business throughout the year; Hunstanton was regularly manned on Wednesdays, at least in the summer months, and perhaps on other days; and the only mention of Fakenham in James’ diaries can be dated to a Friday.¹⁵

The arrangement was that Speight should work from Monday to Saturday, with one Friday afternoon off in three. He seems to have settled in quickly, and a week after his arrival he was enjoying his first taste of working unsupervised.

Mr Wright has a small branch studio at a small country town called Swaffham, about fourteen miles from Lynn, and I have got to manage it which means I have got to go every Saturday. Went for the first time today, and had three sitters.

Then, less than a fortnight later, he prepared for further responsibility.

As I shall have to frequently manage Mr Wright's studio at Hunstanton, he took me over and showed me the working of the place.

Though this seaside operation may have been primarily an addition to the town's growing holiday attractions, it had to compete with a number of established studios. William McLean, Hunstanton's first professional photographer, had launched his business in the 1860s¹⁶ and was still active; the Mace family had opened their Esplanade studio in the 1880s, and Augustus Mace already had a series of royal portraits to his credit;¹⁷ and Frederick Ralph (he who had advised Princess Alexandra on processing her own pictures) had set up a Hunstanton branch of his Dersingham studio in about 1892.¹⁸ Yet Wright's studio managed to appeal to some of the town's more upmarket clientele, and it was Speight who, on 21st September 1898, 'Photographed Lady Meredyth's baby in the Hunstanton studio.'

There were also out-of-studio trips, when Speight accompanied his employer to fulfil a commission or record a local event. One such occasion occurred about a month after his arrival, when, on Lynn's Life Boat Day, he 'Helped Mr Wright to take some instantaneous views of the procession'. The fund-raising event was a major spectator attraction, and the lengthy procession wound its way round the town on a beautiful afternoon with, according to the *Lynn Advertiser*, 'scarce a cloud to dim the rays of the autumn sun'.¹⁹ Police, soldiers, sailors, coastguards, Church Lads' and Boys' Brigades, Ambulance Corps and Fire Brigade all took part, along with the Mayor and Corporation, cyclists, a 'Grace Darling' float, a motor car and more. The harbour's pilot boat and two fishing boats were hauled along on trolleys; but pride of place went to the lifeboat, set on a carriage, drawn by eight shire horses, and manned by Hunstanton's 13-strong lifeboat crew in blue guernseys, red stocking caps and cork lifebelts. Wright seems to have been sympathetic to the younger man's lively curiosity, for, once the pictures of the procession had been taken, he 'allowed me to go and see the Life-boat launched, which was done in the presence of thousands of people.'

Inevitably, things sometimes went wrong for the new young manager. On his third Saturday at Swaffham he 'left the lid off a box which had nine exposed cabinet plates in, and the darkroom door being open, they were all fogged'. This was a serious error, for it meant some explanation would have to be given to disappointed customers, and it showed Wright's business in a poor light. Failed exposures – a standard excuse for incompetence – had been common enough in the earlier days of photography, and patrons accepted that a second sitting might sometimes be necessary. By the 1890s, however, they were not the kind of mishap to which a respectable photographer had frequently to admit. Speight did not record Wright's reaction to the accident, but he can hardly have been pleased.

Later in the autumn, there was another misfortune, though Speight was this time in no way to blame:

20 October. We have had an accident today. Mr Wright had to go some distance to do some photographing. He had brought the pony and trap round to the front door, and told Emily, the nursemaid, to hold the pony while he went in and got ready. While he was away, the pony got a little on the footpath, at which the girl screamed and of course the pony bolted, and ended in smashing the trap to pieces. In some strange way the wheel went right over Emily's hand causing it to swell to a tremendous size. She was taken to the Hospital where it was bandaged etc. A long account of the incident appeared in the papers.

That account added that Emily Bailey was dragged along for a distance, then 'squeezed ... against the palings of some houses, throwing her down ... a wheel of the cart going over her body'. It made light, however, of Emily's injury, describing it as 'a slight one to her wrist'.²⁰

In his non-working hours Speight began to build a life in his new surroundings. Some of his pleasures were solitary. He took long walks, and Castle Rising was one favoured destination. 'From the top of the castle a very fine view is obtained,' he observed on his first visit, 'the sea being plainly seen.' Later, in January 1899, he commented on the traffic using the route: 'On the road a Motor Car and also a Motor Cycle overtook me, but they are getting quite common now.' He also enjoyed swimming, taking an early opportunity to bathe in the Ouse from the West Lynn bank and noting that 'Higher up the river they were dredging for the bodies of two little boys who were drowned last Friday while paddling.' By the following summer he had also discovered the pleasure of bathing in the sea after a day's work in Hunstanton.

He was, though, gregarious by nature, and when Mrs Pratt took in a new lodger, 'a young fellow of the name of Stanton', Speight soon enlisted him as a walking companion. When the Pratt girls decorated All Saints' Church for Harvest Thanksgiving, he was there to help 'by carrying the wheat sheaves to the church'. There were, naturally, some early feelings of loneliness, but Speight's ability to deal with them is suggested by a diary entry at the beginning of November:

Attended Evensong, after which there was a Social... . I was very miserable the first ten minutes, as I did not [know] anyone, but I moved my seat to near a group of five lively girls with whom I soon got on friendly. After that I enjoyed the evening immensely.

The picture that emerges from the diary is of a serious young man, intent on self improvement, curious about a locality that was new to him, and strong in his religious beliefs. He took private drawing lessons and, having 'decided that is quite necessary for me to study art', signed up for evening classes at the Technical School. He was surprised by the queues outside labour registry offices on the twelfth day after Michaelmas, when Norfolk servants traditionally sought new positions, and he noted that the Prince of Wales' birthday was given local importance 'on account of Lynn being only eight miles from Sandringham'. He also recorded a fire at Scott's furniture workshop and the death by explosion of 'the son (age about thirty) of Mr Burlingham,

a well known jeweller, while experimenting with some gas for a magic lantern'. He joined the Communicants' Guild at All Saints' Church and attended the newly reopened Lady Chapel in St Margaret's.

He was also sociable and had a sense of sympathy and fun. He attended socials at church and night school (where he helped hand round refreshments and described his first encounter with a gramophone as 'a great treat'), he enjoyed the fireworks on November 5th, and, six days later, he showed interest in the birth of Emma Purdy Wright: 'Mr Wright has been blessed with an addition. A little girl arrived early this morning.'

Then it was nearly Christmas. On 23rd December, Speight posted his Christmas cards, and on 24th he set off home for Rugby. Wright had proved a generous employer. He had given his assistant ten shillings as a Christmas box, which would have fed a low-income family for a week and was the same amount as Speight had received as a present from his parents on his 20th birthday. Perhaps even more generous was the fact that James was not required back in Lynn until January 2nd.

It was an effort to return to work. 'After a most enjoyable holiday,' Speight was forced to admit, 'I had the hump very bad.' But he soon found himself caught up again in Lynn life, and it is evident that work and pleasure sometimes overlapped. On January 12th he was invited to the Wright's annual party. It is not clear whether other members of the staff were also present, or whether Speight enjoyed special recognition as senior assistant and branch manager. Either way, he enjoyed the occasion, and the recent 'hump' was quite forgotten: 'I had a grand time There was dancing (I got through a polka quite well) and all kinds of games. We also had the gramophone.' Given the musical interests of the Wright household, the emphasis on dancing and the enthusiasm for new recording technology seem very natural.

Then, in the following month, Speight had his first experience of Lynn's St Valentine fair, and the studio's staff formed the nucleus of an excited group.

18 February. Went to the Mart. Miss Porter and self went on the horses. Then she and Miss Hammond and I all went on one ostrich. Then Turner and I took Miss Cawston and Miss Ellison (to whom I was introduced) first in the spew pan and then twice on the gondolas and lasting (sic) to the cinematograph. I enjoyed myself immensely.

There was nothing staid about the Mart. The roundabouts moved at a brisk pace, and there were two occasions that year when a woman fell off a galloper –one of them landing on a four-year-old girl.²¹ As for the 'spew pan' (which can hardly have been its official title), its nature is not clear, but it certainly sounds lively and may, like the horses, ostriches and gondolas, have been some kind of steam-driven ride. Attractions like these were not new – Frederick Savage of Lynn had been creating such rides for over 30 years – and the 1890s saw a proliferation of patents taken out for new designs, many of which were short-lived.

The Mart also brought increased custom for the town's permanent businesses, and on February 21st the studio had 65 sitters, even though the London Road business was some way from the Tuesday Market Place where the Mart was held. (Dexter's studio,

for instance, was much nearer the centre of events, and Smith's was almost adjoining the market square.) It was, Speight believed, 'the busiest day Mr Wright has ever had'.

Shortly after, he had his first experience of running Wright's Fakenham branch. He travelled there on a snowy day, and he was not greatly impressed, describing the studio as 'a little place built on some allotments'. It was not one of his happiest days, for he also took the ill-advised opportunity of a little sightseeing:

Looked round the Church. While I was inside someone came and locked the door, evidently the woman who was cleaning. I was in a great fix, till at last I discovered another door that was undone.

Outside work, Speight was becoming increasingly involved, on the Anglo-Catholic or High Church side, in controversy over church ritual. In March, when a group of anti-Ritualists descended on the town to preach, he was among the tract-wielding protesters who, according to a press report, 'made vigorous counter demonstrations', offering 'counter-applause and slight uproar'.²²

If, at church, he sided with tradition, in the environment of the studio he was starting to look for change. He began to think of his future as spring approached: 'As I intend getting another situation soon I cannot afford to go home this Easter.' His sense of being unsettled was then given an edge by a visit from two of his brothers. Stuck for the weekend in Norfolk, his initial plan had been to visit Great Yarmouth on the Bank Holiday Monday. Just as he was getting ready, however, a telegram was delivered, announcing the imminent arrival of Gull (Gulliver) and Clare (George was always known by this, his third, name). They were coming to see him and expected to be in Lynn by midday. The telegram was quickly followed by a letter – so swift and efficient was the post at the turn of the century – inviting him to find a bicycle and meet them part-way. Some confusion followed. James did indeed hire a cycle and rode to Wisbech, but somehow he missed his brothers there and only managed to meet up with them on returning to Lynn. James then gave his brothers a tour of the town, and 'Gull ordered two bags of cockle shells of a fisherman for his greenhouse.' Clare had a proposition that accorded with James' developing sense of restlessness: he wanted his younger brother to manage his Nuneaton studio while he was away for three weeks in May, and he offered 'board and lodgings and £1 a week'. After this, presumably, Gull and Clare returned to the Midlands. It is remarkable just how much communication and travelling the late Victorians could pack into a single day!

James thought over Clare's proposal. In mid-April he gave Wright notice, but Wright was not keen to lose him. The fogged plates were a thing of the past, and the assistant had clearly become very useful to his employer. Within 24 hours of receiving notice, Wright made an offer of a pay rise to 30 shillings a week. (Unfortunately, Speight's starting wage went unrecorded, but junior assistant operators commonly earned about 20 shillings a week,²³ and his experience made him more than a mere junior.) James responded with a request for 35 shillings and added that he now felt obliged to help Clare. Remarkably, Wright was willing to come to an understanding. In a solution that suggests both how flexible Wright could be and how valuable Speight had become, James was allowed to take the three weeks he needed to deputise for Clare and then to resume working in Lynn for the wage he had sought.

Perhaps the weeks in Nuneaton provided the kind of change that Speight needed; perhaps the increased income reconciled him to staying in Lynn; perhaps the successful negotiations had boosted his morale. Whatever the reason, Speight seems to have returned to Lynn in June 1899 in a buoyant mood, remarking that the studio's business was 'jogging along nicely' and finding rather grander accommodation for himself by taking 'two very nice rooms for 7/6 ... with a Mrs Radford, Paradise Lane.' A week later his spirits were raised further by a surprise delivery: 'When I got home there was a large package waiting for me which proved to be a glorious lot of flowers from Rugby.' He took a selection of these in to work the next morning and, with admirable diplomacy, presented some to Emma Wright, some to Miss Porter and some to Miss Hammond.

In this second year in Lynn, Speight's diary tended to focus even more on events outside the studio than on his hours at work. This was natural enough, since the business had become familiar and he had developed a full social life.

Church affairs still took up much of his time. He joined a newly-formed Anglo-Catholic Brotherhood (of five members) as secretary and treasurer, and was also elected sub-editor of their projected magazine, which quickly proved too expensive to publish. He followed the progress of a new reredos in St Margaret's and attended its dedication; he became a Sunday School teacher at St Nicholas'; he voiced his approval of Mr Rowe, the new vicar ('a very fair churchman'). When a further group of anti-Ritualist preachers came to town, he once again grew indignant – one speaker was 'very blasphemous' and others were 'absurd – and joined in the distribution of protesting pamphlets. One wonders how Jasper Wright, a Methodist,²⁴ viewed these Anglican excitements.

The most human and touching of the diary's church-related entries came in December 1899:

At the offertory I was generous to put 10/- in the bag. I had sixpence a half sovereign & some coppers in my pocket & when the bag came around I felt in pocket for the sixpence & did not look at what I was putting in. When I got home I missed the half sovereign. I told Stead, the vergger about it & after matins the Rector gave it me back again.

The diary was also used to record domestic and personal milestones: Speight's 21st birthday (when he received a money order for 21 shillings from his parents and 'a splendid lot of good things'), and a further change of accommodation. Mrs Radford had, it seems, proved adept at charging for extras - '9d for fire & 3d for boots & so on, 'til I can stand it no longer' – and Speight found himself new rooms with Mrs Thorne in Providence Street, where he would be the only lodger.

The campaign of self-improvement continued and was extended to include social as well as artistic skills. In September 1899, when the results of the previous year's examinations were published, Speight found himself with first-class certificates (elementary and advanced) in 'Light and Shade' and 'Freehand', along with second-class certificates in 'Model'. He promptly signed up for new evening classes in 'Design', 'Principles of Ornament' and 'The Figure'. That meant commitments on

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. Then he added a winter series of private classes – also on Wednesdays – to his curriculum: ‘I have long wished to learn dancing & at last I have both the opportunity and the money.’ Finally, early in the new year of 1900, he decided to devote yet more time to his programme of personal development:

I have arranged to take some singing lessons off Mr Jones the Organist at All Saints. I have got a voice like a rook yet I want to make the most of what I have got. His terms are 15/- for the quarter. I am going to have half an hour lessons on Friday & Saturday nights. Had my first one tonight. I did feel an ass!

Somehow he still found time for more relaxed socialising. He tried his hand at bowls; he went to the Barnum and Bailey show; he went ice-skating. He spent a day at Hunstanton with church friends; and, with two other young men, he spent a busy August Bank Holiday travelling to Yarmouth (presumably by train), going on to Gorleston by boat and back to Yarmouth by tram, riding on ‘the switch-back railway’, taking a sea trip and returning to Lynn. Much time was spent with Mr and Rust of Queen Street, whom he first met as fellow Anglo-Catholics, and who became close friends. Albert Rust, in his mid-30s²⁵ and soon to be verger at St Margaret’s,²⁶ seems to have been both companion and father-figure, and Speight was clearly very relaxed in the couple’s company, as suggested by his unaffected pleasure at one of their jokes:

Called at Rs as usual but Mrs R said Pa wanted me at the church for something very important. Round I went yet no Pa there, at last he came & said “Speight they’re fooling you, it’s the 1st of April” – I felt happy.

It was at a party given by the Rusts for the departing Mr Rowe, whose stay in the parish had been brief, that James first exercised his ‘voice like a rook’ in public. ‘We had some jolly games ... I sung my first comic song “At my time of life”.’ It was an interesting choice. The piece had been made popular by Herbert Campbell, a beefy music-hall comedian and long-time pantomime partner of Dan Leno, and later that year it was put on record by Charles Foster, a prolific ‘cover-version’ artist. It was sung in the character of an elderly Cockney wife who resists her husband’s encouragement to dress and behave as a New Woman:

There was none o’ yer ‘Highty Flighty’ girls
Yer ‘Hi-tiddley Hi-ty girls
When my old ‘Stick in the mud’ took me for a wife.
Now fancy me a-smoking fags,
Riding bikes and wearing bags,
A leaving off my bits of rags,
At my time of life.

Ostensibly, the song satirised unseemly fashions and upheld traditional values, but it was far from a parlour ballad. Lines like ‘I’ve satisfied my husband in the good old-fashioned way’ and ‘I likes my drop of stimulant as all good ladies do’ were not, perhaps, lines most likely to be heard as a Victorian farewell to ‘a very fair churchman’. But posterity may have an oversimplified view of the Victorians. The Rusts’ gathering seems, at any rate, to have enjoyed the song, and it is clear from

James' remark, 'My get up was A1', that, like Herbert Campbell, he performed it in drag.

One slightly surprising aspect of Speight's journal is its fascinated attention to fires, but fires were quite a common event in turn-of-the-century Lynn. On one occasion some workshops were ablaze. ('Lovely flames.') On another he was woken at midnight by police whistles and discovered that a public house in the street was on fire. ('Off we went like a shot.') Most dramatic was a fire at Leake's Oil Mill which spread to the dwellings in Queen Street:

Out of every window were being flung bedsteads, pictures, tables, chairs, fenders, etc etc and I myself certainly thought all those cottages were done for. My great fear was for my friends Mr & Mrs Rust, for whose house I was very anxious. Just as I got to the door, poor Mrs Rust was coming out ... quite dazed and in a half fainting condition, and I must confess, to my great amusement, was carrying a huge apron full of old boots!

Speight helped her to safety and then joined the street's residents in struggling to control the blaze until the very welcome arrival of the fire brigade. His fire-fighting experience stood him in good stead a few months later at his own lodgings: 'The house maid was rushing about frantic ... There was the mantle shelf etc in flames. I seized a cloth and began dabbing out the flames for dear life.' A pan of fat had caught light, but thanks to Speight's prompt efforts, the fire was quickly put out.

Amid all the events from his non-working life, Speight still found some time to shed light on studio activities and the world of the Wrights. In August 1899 he 'Photographed Mr Bunkall, the Mayor in his robes', thereby providing further evidence that though Wright set his prices at an affordable level, he also attracted customers from the upper end of the market. In November of the same year he discovered the perks of a rural businessman, when 'a customer at Swaffham gave me a couple of rabbits.'

It appears that, under his management, the Swaffham studio was doing steady business. Market day was a good day for impulse trade, and harvest time made for particularly busy markets, as Speight recorded in the autumn of 1899:

2 September. Busy day at Swaffham. The farmers and labourers all seem to arrange to get their harvest done at the same time and then all come into town on the same Saturday. The town was very busy & there were roundabouts, swings etc. Had twenty sitters & should have had more but for the rain.

To mark the New Year in 1900 the Wrights once again gave a big party, hiring the Athenaeum Music Hall and inviting about 100 guests. Speight 'Spent a very jolly time', (though after a much smaller party hosted by the Rusts a week later he noted, 'Enjoyed myself more still.')

The turn of the year was not all jollity, however, for Wright's staff had been depleted. Towards the end of November 'Mr Turner had heard rumours and they were confirmed by Mr Wright telling him on Sat. that he could not afford to keep him on after Xmas.' It is hard to know quite what to make of this. A few months earlier

Wright had felt able to make a significant increase in Speight's salary, and he was soon to throw a party for 100 people. Yet Turner's continued employment (probably at something in the region of 25 shillings a week)²⁷ seems to have been too great an expense. Wright does not appear to have been a harsh employer, and the fact that Turner had heard rumours suggests that Wright had been mulling over the change for some time and was reluctant to make a decision. That Turner was given a full month's notice also suggests a level of consideration that Victorian employers did not always feel bound to show. It may be that the decision was not just about money but about the value of Turner to the studio. Speight had described him as very deaf, and deafness can be a crippling disability. It did not prevent Turner from having some sort of social life with those he already knew: he had joined Speight and the Misses Hammond and Porter at the Mart, and he had been ice-skating with Speight. In a customer-facing trade, however, deafness could create great difficulties – as another of Lynn's photographers would soon discover. As a retoucher, Turner was a back-room worker who did not need to deal directly with clients. Perhaps, though, to employ someone to do nothing but retouching was a luxury the business could not afford.

A further element in Wright's deliberations may have been that he needed money to invest. 'I do not think I have mentioned that Lynn is being lighted by electricity,' wrote Speight in the summer of 1899. 'It will be ready for both public and private use by the beginning of September. Mr Wright is having his premises lighted by it.'

Electric lighting opened up great possibilities for studio photographers. Gas and highly volatile magnesium flares had been tried as artificial lighting for portraiture, but making pictures by natural light remained the norm until electricity became available. Even when it did, some professionals were reluctant to use it, preferring the softer tones rendered by daylight. Jasper Wright was not, however, inclined to that way of thinking. He was keen to have the advantages of electric lighting at his disposal: it could shorten exposures, especially on overcast days, and it could extend opening hours. A studio was, after all, the only kind of high street shop that had to cease its main activity at about 3.30 or 4.00 p.m. during the winter months or in murky weather.

The problem with electricity was that it took its time in coming. Bigger centres of population were, unsurprisingly, the first to benefit. Power had been laid on to some parts of East Anglia back in the 1880s, but Lynn had then been a long way from the head of the queue. Now the town's turn had come: on August 11th Speight looked in at the Town Hall to see the public testing of the new lighting, and he seemed impressed. On that same day the *Lynn Advertiser* reported that 'all the street mains are complete and have been tested', but still 'some elaborate tests will have to be made'.²⁸ The first domestic customers were connected by the end of the month,²⁹ and the paper was soon able to announce that 'The popularity of the light among private customers is increasing, and the list of customers is receiving numerous additions.'³⁰

Wright's electric studio took a little while to become a reality. There were plans to be drawn up, money to be found and arrangements to be made. But eventually, on 28th February 1900, Speight was able to note: 'Mr Wright is going to have a new studio built (not before we want it). They began today.' How long the work took is not known, for Speight made no further mention of it and it may have been uncompleted

when he left three months later. His use of the word 'built' suggests a substantial undertaking, but there was no change of a studio address, so either an extensive refit or a new extension seems likely.

In addition to recording events in his and the town's lives, Speight was conscious of the wider world, and the Boer War (or, to be more accurate, the Second Boer War) was a background reality that could not be excluded from his diary. The public knew and cared about what was happening; the Lynn press was not alone in carrying regular reports and letters from the front, and James Speight was not alone in awaiting news. On 30th October 1899 he lamented heavy losses to the Royal Irish Fusiliers and Gloucester Regiment, and on 16th February 1900 he reflected that 'up 'til the welcome news of the relief of Kimberley, it has been practically nothing but a succession of British reverses.' When asked for his singing lesson to learn 'The Absent-Minded Beggar', a poem written by Rudyard Kipling and set to music by Sir Arthur Sullivan, he experienced mixed feelings: 'The words are vulgar rot but music good.' Written to raise money for the Soldiers' Families' Fund, the poem eschewed patriotic swagger and pleaded with those at home to do something more positive than 'killing Kruger with your mouth'. Acknowledging that Tommy Atkins' dependents might well be 'girls he married secret' or 'girls he walked with casual', and that 'rather more than likely there's a kid', Kipling insisted:

But it ain't the time for sermons with the winter coming on.
We must help the girl that Tommy's left behind him!³¹

When Speight made his diary entry, he noted that the song had made £70,000 from waived fees and diverted royalties, and it went on to raise nearly four times that amount. Vulgar? Certainly. Rot? That is, at least, debatable.

On 1st March 1900 the war and the studio came together in an entry in Speight's diary: 'Ladysmith relieved Everyone is wild with delight & we at Wright's behaved most outrageous. Both the bells of S Marg(aret) & S Nicholas rang joyously. The streets and houses were gay with bunting & flags etc.' Wright himself, if present, was an employer who clearly knew when to smile on 'outrageous'.

Ten days after the relief of Ladysmith, Speight bought himself an autograph book. The cover was labelled 'Autographs and Addresses of my Friends', and on the first page he wrote (quoting Bolingbroke in Shakespeare's *Richard II*), 'I count myself in nothing else so happy, as in a soul remembering my good friends.' Then, over the next few weeks, he collected signatures of friends, mentors and colleagues. Some added cheery messages, others penned sententious advice. Albert Rust took up two whole pages. The entries of Florence Porter and Maggie Hammond have already been mentioned. Lewis Reeve, the 'apprentice', wrote his name, his address and the date in the top left-hand quarter of a page and Wright contented himself with 'Jasper Wright April 1900', placed lower and off-centre on the same sheet. The layout suggests that he was the second to sign it and, therefore, that he chose not to claim a full page for himself. Emma Wright then added her name in the space below on the left.

It may be that Speight sought these signatures in the knowledge that he would soon be leaving Lynn. Certainly, when spring came, he was again feeling the urge to move on. He had been working for Wright for nearly two years, and he was keen to gain more

varied experience before realising the standard family ambition of a studio of his own. Two of his brothers were also looking for help. ‘Have decided to leave Mr Wright about this time,’ he wrote, ‘& it was agreed that I manage Clare’s place while he was on holiday which would be about the end of May. Now Charlie was writing to ask me to come and help him into his new place.’

After a little negotiation between brothers, Speight gave notice to Wright and went to Kettering to help Charles with his move into a new and rather grand studio. While there, he looked for possible locations for a studio of his own, but finding none, worked briefly for W.P. Varney of Lichfield, before returning to Kettering to cover for Charles during a period of illness. By September his brother had recovered sufficiently for him to move on and spend a month in Paris, working as retoucher for the distinguished Reutlinger studio. On his return he worked again for Varney, but fell victim to typhoid early in 1901. By the end of the year, however, he was planning a purpose-built studio in Sutton Coldfield. He moved into a second and larger Sutton Coldfield studio in 1908, and he continued there, with an interruption for service in the First World War, until his retirement in 1950. He died in 1977 at the age of 97.³²

¹ Here and throughout the chapter (unless otherwise indicated), details are drawn from James Speight’s diary, volumes 2 to 6, transcribed by John Frearson.

² Worn in the Speight family’s ‘departure’ photograph; copy accompanying John Frearson’s transcript.

³ Mentioned only in Kelly’s *Directory of Norfolk*, 1892.

⁴ Mentioned only in *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1889.

⁵ First mention in print: *Lynn News Almanack & Diary*, 1887.

⁶ First mention in print: *King’s Lynn Red Book*, 1898.

⁷ First mention in print: Kelly’s *Directory of Norfolk*, 1900, but known to Speight in 1898.

⁸ 1881 census: RG11, piece 2000, folio 46, page 15.

⁹ GRO Birth Index, Dec 1898, King’s Lynn 4b 324.

¹⁰ Speight family background in this paragraph is from *The Speights of Rugby – Photographers*, (John Frearson, John Frearson Publications, Rugby, 2009).

¹¹ 1901 census: RG13, piece 1889, folio 124, page 27.

¹² *Lincolnshire Echo*, 27th June, 1895.

¹³ 1901 census: RG13, piece 1888, folio 98, page 16.

¹⁴ *The Harmsworth Self Educator*, fortnightly 1906-1907 [Selectively reprinted as: Robson, Maisie, ed., *1906: Every Man for Himself*, (Barnsley: Eynsford Hall Press, 2002)].

¹⁵ Days identified using *Dates and Calendars for the Genealogist*, Clifford Webb, (London: Society of Genealogists, 1989)

¹⁶ *Lynn Advertiser*, 23rd June 1866.

¹⁷ The National Archives: Copyright applications to Stationers’ Hall - COPY 1/375/4, COPY 1/375/5, COPY 1/375/84

¹⁸ *Developing the Picture, Queen Alexandra and the Art of Photography*, Frances Dimond, (London: Royal Collection Enterprises, 2004).

¹⁹ Quotation and details of procession from *Lynn Advertiser*, 30th September 1898.

²⁰ *Lynn Advertiser*, 21st October 1898.

²¹ *Lynn Advertiser*, 24th February 1899.

²² *Lynn Advertiser*, 17th March 1899.

²³ *The Harmsworth Self Educator*, fortnightly 1906-1907 [Selectively reprinted as: Robson, Maisie, ed., *1906: Every Man for Himself*, (Barnsley: Eynsford Hall Press, 2002)].

²⁴ *Lynn Advertiser*, 4th March 1940.

²⁵ 1901 census index.

²⁶ Kelly’s *Directory of Norfolk*, 1901.

²⁷ *The Harmsworth Self Educator*, fortnightly 1906-1907 [Selectively reprinted as: Robson, Maisie, ed., *1906: Every Man for Himself*, (Barnsley: Eynsford Hall Press, 2002)].

²⁸ *Lynn Advertiser*, 11th August 1890.

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- ²⁹ *Lynn Advertiser*, 25th August 1890.
- ³⁰ *Lynn Advertiser*, 1st September 1890.
- ³¹ Rudyard Kipling: *The Absent-Minded Beggar*, (*Daily Mail*, 30th October 1899).
- ³² Details of James Speight's post-Lynn career are from *The Speights of Rugby – Photographers*, (John Frearson, John Frearson Publications, Rugby, 2009).