

16. Shapes of things to come (1889 -1906)

James Speight's diary reflected a changing world. Photography was something he had grown up with; steam power, on railways and fairgrounds, was an established fact of life; and motor cars and motor cycles were becoming everyday sights. The new wonders were mains electricity, the cinematograph and sound recording. But photography, though fully matured as a profession, was still something rather new and special for one expanding group of people –amateur photographers. In due course, the rise of amateur photography would affect the business of the professional studio. For some years, however, though amateurs would increase hugely in numbers, most of them would still turn to the professional for decent portraits.

There had been amateurs since the early days of photography, but they had needed both money and time to pursue their hobby. Over the years, however, technical advances made the activity more accessible: the introduction of pre-prepared glass plates did away with the messy arcana of the wet collodion process, and the arrival of roll-film in the 1880s opened up photography to a new wave of enthusiasts. By the end of the decade serious amateur photographers with portable glass-plate cameras could use local dark-room facilities to process the pictures they had taken, while less adventurous beginners could buy the new Kodak cameras in which a roll of film came ready-fitted, capture a series of images, and return the film (still in the camera) to the supplier for processing. Then, in 1900, came a development that made do-it-yourself photography affordable to those of very modest means. The Kodak company's Box Brownie represented the ready-loaded camera concept stripped it to its basics, and it cost only five shillings. It did for the amateur photographer what the carte de visite had done for the professional studio: it opened up a mass market.

The first signs of the rise of the amateur in Lynn have already been noted. In 1889 John Smith had advertised products and facilities to the growing band of hobbyists,¹ only to find that William Palmer, a local chemist, was already catering for their needs.² He offered a full range of cameras, tripods, dry plates, sensitised paper, chemicals, printing frames and more, and he was willing to give instruction and advice. There also already existed a King's Lynn Amateurs' Photographic Society, the rules of which could be obtained at Palmer's shop.

Pooling resources was an effective way of sharing the costs of a potentially expensive pastime, and before long the town's amateur society was not the only organised group devoted to photography. In August 1891 C. W. Perry, president of the Lynn Young Men's Christian Association, wrote:

We seek to provide for young men in the varied requirements of their many sided nature, and have a Reading room, Games Room, Photographic Club, Short-hand Class, Lectures and Debates.³

Among the supporters of the YMCA club was John Henry Hall, who at that time occupied the studio at 4 London Road. He was one of those exhibiting prints and photographic materials at the group's September meeting,⁴ and he is recorded as acting as projectionist (and, presumably, provider of projection equipment) at a slide show the following year.⁵

The King's Lynn Amateurs Photographic Society seems to have been fairly short-lived, for, in 1896, the new Lynn Photographic Society was launched, and this group held its first exhibition, built around a loan collection of pictures by 'leading pictorial and artistic workers', in 1897.⁶ (The secretary, William Daw, a Nelson Street pork butcher, had also been involved in the formation of the YMCA club.⁷ He later moved up the coast to Hunstanton, and went on to launch his own photographic business.)⁸

Though John Smith chose not to target amateur photographers in the local press after 1889, he persevered with his provision for that market. His only direct response to Palmer's advertisements had been to offer the use of his darkroom services to European tourists.⁹ It appears, nevertheless, that he continued to extend darkroom facilities to home-grown amateurs, for in 1894 two Lynn names featured in the Royal Photographic Society's list of darkrooms that could be made available to members of affiliated societies.¹⁰ One was T. Smith and Sons, and the other was W.H. Cockle. William Palmer, who had appeared on the *British Journal of Photography*'s list of photographic suppliers six years earlier,¹¹ was not listed.

Like Palmer, Cockle was a chemist. His High Street business was also home to his optician's practice, and he took on the mantle of the amateur's champion. He had been yet another supporter of the YMCA group in its early days,¹² and by 1901 he was calling his shop the 'Headquarters for Amateur Photography'.¹³ As an 'Agent for All Kodak Goods', he took pride in the range he could offer:

Over 50 Cameras in stock to select from, Price 4/6 to £15 each. The Surprise of the Season. Nipper Camera at 4/6. Nipper Outfit at 3/-. Dry Plates at 6d. per doz. Use Cockle's developer in 3d. packets and 1/- bottles.

By this time, his main competitor in the amateur market – or, at least, the competitor adopting the highest profile – was Sydney Count, another High Street chemist, who boasted 'a Large Stock of Cameras of all sizes and prices. Plates and Papers of Different Makes. Developers and Toning Solutions. Dark Room for the use of Customers.'¹⁴

The two chemists ran their advertisements over several 1901 issues of the *Lynn Advertiser*, but it was Cockle who continued to set himself in the public eye over the years that followed. In 1902 he reminded customers that his 'large stock' was 'all at London prices'.¹⁵ In 1904 his sensitised papers included 'Bromide and P.O.P.' (printing-out paper), and he developed film and sent the results by return post from 6d a spool.¹⁶

Both Count and Cockle placed half-page advertisements in a 1905 guide to the town.¹⁷ But whereas Count merely appended 'A Large Stock of Photographic Goods' to the more

prominently featured 'Pure Drugs and Chemicals. Invalid Requisites and Surgical Appliances', Cockle gave his photographic supplies first mention. Still claiming the status of 'Amateur Photography Headquarters, he had 'All Makes of Plates and Film in Stock' and offered 'Cameras on Hire'.

Others played their part in supplying the amateur photographer during the Edwardian period. Allen and Neale, another High Street chemist, advertised as 'photographic material dealers',¹⁸ as did Boughton and Son, who had opened their first studio in 1900 and were relative newcomers to the town.¹⁹ But Cockle maintained his role over the years, and in 1914, less than a month before the outbreak of the First World War, he was urging readers:

Make your holiday a success with a Kodak. You are going to make your holiday this year the happiest you ever spent. Are you going to leave all the fun behind you when you come home? Take a Kodak with you and bring back all your holiday happiness in an album of jolly Kodak snapshots. There is no end to the enjoyment of a Kodak holiday. It lives for ever.²⁰

Ironically, the happy times he invoked were about to end, and some of the products he was promoting – Folding Pocket Kodaks at £2-2-0 and £3-12-6 – would be carried off to the front by newly-enlisted soldiers, blithely ignoring regulations about taking cameras to war.

The rise of the amateur photographer was not the only major development during these years. The end of the nineteenth century was marked by another far-reaching change in image-making, when moving pictures became a possibility. In 1891 Thomas Edison patented the kinetoscope and kinetograph, and in 1895 the Lumière brothers premiered their cinematograph in Paris. Though this innovation was – as it turned out – to make its eventual impact not on studio photography, but on popular live entertainment, it did underline the fact that still pictures were no longer the wonder of the age.

For the people of Lynn, the first chance to marvel at moving pictures came in 1897, and the presenter was Randall Williams.

Williams had started his career as a fairground conjurer and had, for some years, been mounting shows built on optical novelties and illusions.²¹ On Christmas Eve 1896, at the World's Fair Exhibition in London, he made a sensation by adapting his existing Phantascopical Exhibition (or 'ghost show') to exhibit early films. Then, in February 1897, at the first event on the showman's annual calendar, he became the first person to introduce moving pictures to English fairgrounds by bringing his new spectacle to Lynn's Mart. Under the heading 'Important Notice' he announced this landmark event in the *Lynn Advertiser*:

Randall Williams, the King of Showmen, wishes to inform the Inhabitants of King's Lynn and Neighbourhood, that he has bought the Latest and Most Scientific Invention of Modern Times, namely, The Cinemetograph (sic), or

Animated Photographs, the same that has created the greatest *furor* ever known at the Agricultural Hall, London. These Animated Photographs will be exhibited in a large tent specially erected on the Tuesday Market during the Mart. A series of Performances will be given at a stated time on the outside of the building. Prices of Admission: Back seats and promenade, 3d; Front seats, 4d; and a few reserved seats 6d.²²

These were not the sort of exclusive prices at which portrait photography had made its debut in the town half a century earlier; they were prices that a fair-going public could afford. There was, moreover, a free attraction to intrigue them:

R.W. wishes to inform his patrons that these animated photographs are worked by a powerful electric light. The electric engine can be seen working free of charge on the outside.

With mains electricity for Lynn still two and a half years in the future, this engine would doubtless have excited some curiosity. It would certainly have aroused the approval of those who went inside the tent, for electric power was a huge improvement on the evil-smelling naphtha flares by which showmen's booths were customarily lit. There may, too, have been some fairgoers who could take a proprietary interest in the machine, for they may have played a part in building it. Until 1902, when Randall's heirs invested in heavier-duty equipment, use was made of a portable electric dynamo manufactured by the engineering company of Lynn's own Frederick Savage.

The show was an enormous success. The Mart opened in heavy rain, so the demand for indoor attractions was immediate, and a new roundabout, furnished with bicycles instead of the traditional galloping horses, proved less successful than might have been expected.²³ Furthermore, the novelty ride became the focus of a series of complaints during the course of the Mart: several people had their clothes caught in the pedals, and one woman had her skirt torn off. The rain, of course, enhanced the appeal of a covered show, but such a novelty as moving pictures was destined to draw in the crowds, whatever the weather. The *Lynn Advertiser* was unreservedly enthusiastic:

About the best and most up-to-date of the entertainments is that of Mr. Randall Williams, who in a tent splendidly lighted up by an electric arc lamp, exhibits some excellent "living pictures" by means of a cinematographic apparatus, the collection including a serpentine dancer, the Czar in Paris, a Paris boulevard, march past of the Royal Blues, &c... . The show has been crowded each night.²⁴

Williams had also included a live clairvoyant performance in his show, 'by a woman who correctly names and gives particulars of any articles that are handed to an assistant as he passes among the audience'. This addition, drawn from the world of illusion in which Williams had long been at home, must have added to the excitement of the occasion. Its main purpose, however, may have been to bulk out a rather short show: what in 1897 were accepted as films would today be seen as film clips.

There can be no doubt, though, that Lynn's first glimpse of moving pictures was a success, and that success was quickly repeated. Half a century earlier, the town had to wait seven years for a second visit by a photographer, and the less affluent inhabitants had waited a further ten years for affordable portraits to become commonplace. Still photography had to earn its living from individual customers. The cinematograph, by contrast, sought a mass of customers, all at the same time, and prices were set at a level that would produce a full house. 'Cartes for the Million', as advertised by William Woodhouse, had been a long time coming; the cinema was for the million from the very beginning, and its customers were quickly given the chance to repeat the experience.

In that same year, therefore, there were several more occasions when films were shown. In August, Alexandra, Howe and Cushing's Gigantic Circus visited the town, bringing with it not only a 'Colossal Hippodrome, Mammoth Menagerie and Museum of Nature's Freaks and Curiosities', but also 'London's Latest Scientific Craze, The Cinematographe, Living and Animated Photographs, as Exhibited at the Empire Theatre, London, and at all the Largest European Cities'.²⁵ Later that month, at the Diamond Jubilee Fête at Didlington Hall (located near Swaffham, but advertised to the King's Lynn public) patrons were promised – along with a cricket match and other unspecified entertainments – 'Animated Photographs of the Jubilee Procession'.²⁶ Then, in November, the Jubilee procession featured again as the highlight of a 'Special and Important visit of Slade's Electro-Photo Marvel Animated Pictures', which was offered as a 'Tremendous Attraction, Two Nights Only' at the Athenaeum Music Hall.²⁷ This spectacle was currently touring the country, supporting its main feature with such treats as 'Steamer disembarking passengers', 'Grand fountain playing at Versailles' and 'Leap of hurdles by a squadron of dragoons'.²⁸

By the time of the following year's Mart, the cinematograph business had become competitive and four shows were in attendance.²⁹ Randall Williams' offering was one of them, though this was to be his last appearance at the Mart. He died in November 1898, but family members divided up his interests and carried on his activities. When James Speight went to the Mart and enjoyed the cinematograph in 1899, he was attending Williams' daughter and son-in-law's first fair as proprietors of the touring business.³⁰

The picture show was quickly becoming a very desirable addition to public events and diversions. When, in July 1898, David Devant staged an entertainment at Hunstanton Town Hall, a few miles up the coast from Lynn, there were musical sketches, songs and recitals; but top of the bill were '40 Animated Photographs, Including Funeral Cortege of Mr Gladstone'.³¹ When a new trades exhibition was organised in Lynn at the end of 1898, moving pictures provided an extra attraction.³² The only local photographer who seems to have been involved with that exhibition was Jasper Wright, and that was not in connection with his business. He was there in his capacity as band leader.

In fact, both amateur photography and cinematography were making the kind of sensation that had once been made by still photography. It quickly became clear that moving pictures posed no problem for the portrait studio. They belonged from the outset to the world of entertainment and they would, before long, prove a threat to the music

hall; but they did not usurp the role of the professional photographer by offering to document the individual lives of members of the public. Amateur photography was a different matter. Just as professional photographs had won attention at events in earlier years, so, now, did amateurs' pictures. When a bazaar was held in Lynn's St James' Hall in November 1905, one of the attractions was an amateur photography competition. Once again, the only professional photographer mentioned in the press notice was Jasper Wright: he and his son, Handel, were there to play in the bazaar concert.³³

The growing numbers of Box Brownie owners may have taken relatively little trade from the studios. The pictures they took were frequently of poor quality: the camera was too far away from the subject, people screwed up their eyes against the sun, heads were scalped, and faces were lost in the shadow of hat-brims. It was enormously exciting to be able to take one's own photos, but the studio remained the place for a serious portrait. It was only visited on special occasions, but there was nothing new in that. More serious competition came from the dedicated hobbyists, who could afford good equipment, who processed their own images, and who entertained technical and aesthetic aspirations.

One unidentified Lynn amateur provides a good example of such enthusiasts and their work. Examination of his garden settings and family groups – plus consideration of who is missing from family groups – leads to the conclusion that the photographer was a young married man, of the middle class, with no children. Three boxes of his quarter-plate glass negatives, dating from the earliest years of the twentieth century, have survived,³⁴ and they show him to be both ambitious and capable.

Most of his pictures are of people, seen individually and in groups. His wife appears frequently and her parents and sister, along with (presumably) his own parents and siblings, are also well represented. There are photographs, too, of the other friends and relations who completed the couple's generally young, fashionable – and often single – social circle. What is immediately obvious from these examples is that the photographer was good at portraits. He often showed people at full length, but not at the enormous distance characteristic of much amateur work, and, of course, enlargers could by this time be used to crop and magnify an image. He chose his backgrounds with some thought, using parts of buildings, corners of terraces, and garden features and furniture to provide satisfying settings. He experimented, too, with backcloths, using plain fabric that was pale but not startlingly white. Most importantly, he put his sitters at their ease.

He also went beyond the theme of family and friends. He took on technical challenges, manipulating negatives, copying older pictures and attempting interior scenes. He took his camera out and about, photographing buildings in Lynn and Castle Rising and attempting to capture travel by rail and road. When the buildings of Lynn were decorated for Edward VII's coronation in 1902, he was there to make a record; when soldiers of the Norfolk Volunteer Service Company returned from the Second Boer War to Lynn in 1901, he was there, both at the railway station and later on the Tuesday Market, to commemorate the occasion. Like others who took the hobby seriously, he was doing the sort of thing that professionals did, and he was often making a respectable job of it.

Such ambitious amateurs were, of course, in a minority, but it is fair to say that photography was no longer a mystery. Many could now take their own snapshots, and a few could take good photographs. For most people, however, it was still the professional who supplied images of a high quality. The studio remained in control of a firmly established market, and a new format was about to move it out of the Victorian age.

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- 1 *Lynn Advertiser*, 4th May 1889.
 - 2 *Lynn Advertiser*, 18th May 1889.
 - 3 *Bury and Norwich Post*, 25th August 1891.
 - 4 *Lynn Advertiser*, 19th September 1891.
 - 5 *Lynn Advertiser*, 3rd December 1892.
 - 6 *Stamford Mercury*, 1st October 1897.
 - 7 *Lynn Advertiser*, 19th September 1891.
 - 8 As traced in census returns for 1891, 1901 and 1911.
 - 9 *Lynn Advertiser*, 7th September 1889.
 - 10 *The Photographic Journal*, June 26th 1894.
 - 11 *British Journal of Photography*, 1888, p64.
 - 12 *Lynn Advertiser*, 19th September 1891.
 - 13 *Lynn Advertiser*, 3rd May 1901.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 *Lynn Advertiser*, 25th April 1902.
 - 16 *Lynn Advertiser*, 22nd April 1904
 - 17 W A Dutt, *Homeland Handbooks: King's Lynn with its Surroundings*, (London: The Homeland Association, 1905).
 - 18 *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk*, 1904 and 1908.
 - 19 *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk*, 1904.
 - 20 *Lynn Advertiser*, 1st July 1914.
 - 21 Randall Williams background information drawn from the National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield, www.nfa.dept.shef.ac.uk.
 - 22 *Lynn Advertiser*, 12th February 1897.
 - 23 Stephen Peart, *The Picture House in East Anglia*, (Terence Dalton, 1980), p7.
 - 24 *Lynn Advertiser*, 18th February 1897.
 - 25 *Lynn Advertiser*, 13th August 1897.
 - 26 *Lynn Advertiser*, 28th August 1897.
 - 27 *Lynn Advertiser*, 29th October 1897.
 - 28 Pauline Shaw, *Fairground Ancestors*: <http://members.shaw.ca/pauline777/TravellersUK.html>.
 - 29 Stephen Peart, *The Picture House in East Anglia*, (Terence Dalton, 1980), p10.
 - 30 Pauline Shaw, *Fairground Ancestors*: <http://members.shaw.ca/pauline777/TravellersUK.html>.
 - 31 *Lynn Advertiser*, 29th July 1898.
 - 32 *Lynn Advertiser*, 25th November 1898.
 - 33 *Lynn Advertiser*, 1st December 1905.
 - 34 Trues Yard Museum: accession numbers KLNTY2020.833 to KLNTY2020.946.