

‘In the Moon’ – and Other Studios

The Story of Victorian and Edwardian Photography in King’s Lynn

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Introduction

It is curious how a community can lose its memory. In 1940, on the death of Jasper Wright, his obituarist noted that, ‘He was the son of the first photographer to set up in business in the town.’ Earlier, in 1907, Lynn historian Henry Hillen claimed that ‘Messrs Kerry introduced photography’ to the town. Both were wrong. Communal memory, like individual memory, is inclined to fade, and the past has constantly to be rescued from itself.

This history represents an attempt to perform that rescue operation whilst trying to commit as few blunders of its own as it can. Inevitably, it will have its errors and omissions, but I have to hope it will shed more light than it casts shadows. It is the story of a small-business sector in a country town, rather than the more customary studio-by-studio account. (Use of the index should, however, allow the reader to focus on the fortunes of individual photographers). It explores the growth of professional photography in King’s Lynn, tracing how the occupation became established, how it marketed itself, and how it responded to new processes and formats. The speculative visits and short-lived studio ventures of the early years are traced, and the narrative follows through times of sometimes turbulent competition to the emergence of the town’s own photographic dynasties, whose members became an established part of its life.

It’s a story of self-promotion and empire-building, burglary and bankruptcy, cutting prices and (metaphorically) cutting throats. It’s a chronicle of enthusiasts, opportunists and entrepreneurs, of custom-built glass-houses and huts on wheels; it tells of trials and takeovers, price wars and wars of words; it has shipwrecks, fires, fraud and a train crash.

There is no attempt to offer full biographies of individual photographers, but it would be a pity to miss out on some of the more curious or colourful features of their extra-professional lives. Perhaps self-indulgently, therefore, I have followed the fortunes of some practitioners beyond the confines of the studio and have, for example, found room to include a contralto with a coffin, as well as a spot of chicken-rustling.

I need, I think, to explain why I have made my investigations available in this form. This is not a commercially viable publication, and I haven’t the inclination, the patience or (I suspect) the expertise to go down the usual self-publishing routes, for either printed or electronic books. So this is not really a book. It may have the ingredients and structure of a book, but it’s simply shared research. It’s work-in-progress (and will probably continue to be so for as long as I, too, am work-in-progress), but it has reached a point where I need to share it. I am, therefore, offering it free to anyone who is interested, and I’m using the lowest-tech e-route I can think of. Look on it, if you will, not so much as being published as being privately circulated – rather like a rude verse that is passed furtively round the classroom, from desk to desk. (That is, of course, a limited analogy: a rude verse does not usually have footnotes.)

Sadly, my distribution method means that this cannot be an illustrated history. Photographs would have been nice, but I was keen to keep the file small enough for easy transmission by email.

There are a few finicky details to be explained in passing:

The *Lynn Advertiser* is quoted from much more frequently than the *Lynn News*. This is partly because the *Lynn Advertiser* was active throughout the period covered, while the *Lynn News* was in existence for only part of it. But it is also because the *Advertiser* tended to report news and carry specific advertisements a few days earlier than its competitor, and because its coverage tended to be more exhaustive. (In the case of competition between Edwin Bullock and Wallis & Manders in 1877, for instance, the *Lynn News* generally carried new advertisements a week or more later than the *Advertiser*, and it didn't carry Bullock's satirical comment on branch studios at all.)

In transcribing press advertisements, the Victorian love of extensive upper-case lettering has not been reproduced. To preserve something of their dramatic flavour, the practise of starting many words with a capital letter has generally been retained, but some exceptions have been made in the interest of sentence flow and intelligibility.

St Margaret's Church did not become King's Lynn Minster until 2011. It was known as St Margaret's throughout the period covered by this history, and it is thus referred to throughout.

When specific photographs are mentioned without any endnote, it should be assumed that known copies are in private collections.

Photographs held by True's Yard Museum are referred to, in the notes, by their accession numbers, but, as a result of delays caused by Covid-19, many of these images have yet to be catalogued. It may be some time, therefore, before they will be available for inspection.

I am uncomfortably aware that the chapter endnotes and the index have their shortcomings. (Remember, if references sometimes seem a little rough and ready, that this is not really a book.)

On a more positive note, there are acknowledgements to be made. Staff at the King's Lynn Library were unfailingly helpful over a period of many visits. Just as helpful, though less frequently pestered, were librarians in Norwich and Cambridge and the staff of True's Yard Museum in Lynn. When I needed press reports to supplement the information from library microfilms, I turned to the remarkable online collection of the British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk), and I am grateful for permission to quote from my transcriptions of their sources. I am indebted to John Frearson for allowing me to draw on his transcript of James Speight's diaries, and to

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There are others, too, who have helped over the years by providing information, discussing individual photographers, answering my questions, or allowing me to examine images in their collections: my alphabetically-ordered thanks go to Ron Cosens, Bridget Everitt, Brian Gadd, Lynn Gill, Linda King, Charlotte Paton, Dr Michael Pritchard, Les Waters and Christopher Wilkinson, and my apologies go to any I have inadvertently omitted. Finally, I am once again grateful to my wife Pam, who has not only read and commented on this history at various stages of its development, but who has also found herself living with these photographers as if they were invisible members of the family.

Robert Pols
King's Lynn, August 2020