

## PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE BDC

By James Downs

There are over 6,000 photographs in the Bill Douglas Centre, forming an important – if somewhat overlooked – part of the collection. Photography played a key role in the development of the moving image, and the pre-cinema collections include magic lantern slides, ‘flip-books’ of photographs and kinora viewers, a ‘Helios’ stereocard by Eadweard Muybridge and other ephemera and literature relating to chronophotography. As this specialised material merits a more detailed discussion, these notes will concentrate on other parts of the BDC’s photographic collections: namely, the early history of photography, and photographic material relating to the film industry.

The origins of photography are intertwined with the history of cinema and stretch back many centuries, but modern photography is usually dated to 1839 when the independent experiments of William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre were first announced. Talbot improved upon his ‘photogenic drawings’ by perfecting the calotype process in 1841 and the BDC possesses two salt prints made from calotype negatives (EXEBD 27457 and 27459). These were pasted into the May 1846 issue of the *Art Union* periodical, two copies of which are held by the Centre.



The rival daguerreotype process is represented by two portraits (EXEBD 61883 and 61884) by Antoine Claudet, a Frenchman who settled in London and was the first photographer in England to obtain a daguerreotype license. There are also some stereoscopic daguerreotypes of classical statues, mounted in the *passepartout* style

and taken by an unknown photographer (EXEBD 48455 and 48456); these probably date to the 1850s.

Such stereographs – pairs of slightly dissimilar images mounted on a single card – were viewed through a stereoscope that combined the images to give the illusion of three-dimensional space, and were enormously popular in the 19th century. The BDC possesses over a dozen stereoscopic viewers and around 1,500 stereographs. One of the more intriguing of these is *Großdeutschland Wiedergeburt* (EXEBD 39121), a printed book with 120 stereoscopic slides and a viewer fitted into the binding. The slides record the Nazi *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938, exactly a hundred years after the first stereoscope was patented by Charles Wheatstone in 1838. The photographer was Hitler's friend Heinrich Hoffman (1885-1957), in whose Munich studios Eva Braun worked as a teenager.

Returning to the mid-19th century, the BDC has a number of other photographic formats such as the ubiquitous carte-des-visite and the larger cabinet card. As befits Bill's Scottish roots, the BDC holds several examples by Scottish photographers, including George Washington Wilson, William K. Munro, James Ewing, Edmund Geering and William Ferrier. Cartes-des-visite were paper prints made from wet collodion glass negatives, mounted on cards bearing the photographer's details on the reverse; often these were illustrated with ornamental designs and other advertisements which are of interest in their own right.

The BDC has some cartes-des-visite (EXEBD 61947, 91143 and 10297) by William Friese Greene (1855-1921), now regarded as one of the forefathers of modern cinematography and a pioneer in developing colour film processes. After running successful photographic studios in Bath and Plymouth he moved to London and began experimenting with animated photography. The Centre has a reproduction (EXEBD 78039) of his 1889 patent for a camera with sensitised paper film that took picture sequences at four or five frames per second.

Friese Greene's work was soon superseded by the superior accomplishments of Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, who patented their Cinématographe in 1895. Their father Claude-Antoine Lumière (1840-1911) was a successful portrait photographer in Lyons, and the albumen print (EXEBD 61713) of his two sons playing chess was taken in the early 1870s.



Other popular formats flourished alongside cartes-des-visite. Ambrotypes were wet collodion positives on glass, similar in appearance to daguerreotypes but lacking the latter's distinctive mirrored surface. Our ambrotype (EXEBD 37235), a portrait of an unknown woman, is mounted in an attractive case with decorative scallop shell designs. Ferrotypes - also known as tintypes - were similar to ambrotypes but used a sheet of lacquered iron instead of glass plates. As they were cheap, durable and quick to make, they proved ideal for outdoor photographer working at carnivals or fairs – as indicated by the beach scenes depicted on the three ferrotypes (EXEBD 58106-108) in the collection. Studying these images, and the ways in which they were produced, distributed, viewed and appreciated, provides useful insights into the social history of visual culture and popular entertainment.

At the other end of the production scale, there are some large bound albums of photographs, including a fascinating collection of images (EXEBD 49129) showing domestic staff at Bolton Hall in Lancashire, taken by Manchester photographer James Mudd (1821-1906.)



Another album features views of Belvoir Castle (EXEBD 2264-78) including some intimate portraits of Lady Diana Cooper (née Manners) who starred in some of D.W. Griffith's silent movies.

Unsurprisingly, portraits of movie stars form a considerable part of the Centre's photographic collections. The art of portrait photography became increasingly sophisticated as Hollywood studios sought to promote their most popular stars. Portrait photographers played a key role in shaping the public perception of iconic figures such as Garbo and Dietrich, and in doing so provided some of the most memorable images of Hollywood glamour and mystery. The BDC holds work by eminent photographers such as Melbourne Spurr, Alfred Cheney Johnston, Clarence Sinclair Bull, Witzel, Eugene Robert Richee and George Hurrell. Although many of these are reproductions made for the mass market, we are fortunate to have a number of original prints. The use of large format 8' x 10' plate cameras gives these exceptionally high resolution and detail, as is evident in two gorgeous portraits of Loretta Young (EXEBD 60824, 60825.)



These are the work of George Hurrell (1904-92), a master of lighting, who spent half a century creating some of Hollywood's most iconic images. The prints are blind stamped with the photographer's name, as is E.R. Richee's fine portrait of an uncharacteristically-moustachioed Clive Brook (EXEBD 60828), a British actor who starred opposite Dietrich in *Shanghai Express* (1932).

These portraits present movie stars as individuals with personalities independent from their screen roles. In contrast, film stills portray the actors and actresses as integral parts of their movies. Some stills are adapted from the actual film frames, but the resulting grainy image quality makes them inferior to those taken by professional still photographers during filming. This practice emerged in the early 1900s as cinema audiences began demanding pictures and information about their favourite movie stars, creating a rapidly growing market for magazines and publicity postcards. The stills camera was set up alongside the movie camera to shoot the same scenes; the cast could recreate particular actions during breaks in filming, with such intervals providing opportunities for informal production shots and candid 'behind-the-scenes' photos. Publicity stills would then be used in magazines, posters or lobby cards, as a vivid means of attracting cinemagoers to new films.

Without the humble cinemagoer there would be no movie stars and no film industry. The changing face of cinema culture can be traced in numerous photographs of cinema interiors and exteriors, many of which have long since vanished, such as a

1913 view of the Electric Theatre in London's Praed Street (EXEBD 40164). Occasionally a photographer captured the sad sight of a boarded up cinema building, such as the former Astoria, awaiting its conversion into the Brixton Academy concert venue (EXEBD 52468). These photographs are invaluable as historical artefacts, for they are often the only surviving record of the appearance and construction of some of the UK's finest architecture.

The history of cinema and the history of photography share too much common ground to be kept apart. As new academic fields such as 'visual culture' encourage a more multidisciplinary approach to research, the unique collections of the BDC will become increasingly valuable for scholars and students exploring the history of images, be they moving or still.