

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Stuart Bowell – History from old photographs

Stuart Bowell gave a very interesting talk about the early development of photography and the historical value of surviving photographs at the November meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall.

In his introduction, Stuart explained that some technical advances in the use of chemicals for photography dated from the mid-1830s. The developments were often made by gentleman amateurs, like William Henry Fox Talbot. However, by 1860 photography was well established. Major towns and cities had professional photographers listed in local business directories. They often combined photography with other artistic work or picture framing. Some travelling fairs had photographers who took photographs of family groups. By the 1860s there were well established photographic societies, like those in Norwich.

There were many early photographers in East Anglia. Several worked in Ipswich and we are fortunate that some of their fragile photographic plates have been preserved in local museums and archives. For example, in the 1960s the Suffolk Record Office bought the collection of Richard Dykes Alexander's photographs of Ipswich which date from the 1850s. Similarly, it preserves the photographs Cleer Algar took of Diss and the Waveney Valley in the mid-19th Century.

There were some photographs of the Crimean War (1854-56) but the American Civil War (1861-65) was the first conflict to be well documented. Early photography had the problem of taking cumbersome equipment into the streets or countryside. In addition, it needed for the people or animals to absolutely still for a period of time otherwise the image was blurred. These difficulties were gradually overcome by the late 19th Century, a time when the police began to take photographs for criminal records.

Photographs are a valuable historical source as they provide evidence of how life was in the past. Surviving photographs show changes in fashion, transport and the nature of work. Stuart Bowell showed a number of images which were full of fascinating detail. A number were street scenes from the late 19th Century. Buildings, such as the Rising Sun Inn in Bury St Edmunds have barely changed and features like a hayloft and a carriage entrance have been adapted for modern needs. Photographs of roads in Ipswich illustrated the gradual evolution of transport. Horse drawn buses and trams were slowly replaced by electric trams with overhead wires. About 1906, the tram rails in Ipswich were removed and trolley buses were introduced as they were more manoeuvrable. One photograph showed the last trolley bus in the town in 1963. Horses were also used on the railways, for example for shunting at Woodbridge and for moving the level crossing at Halesworth. A photograph of a work's outing had a crowded charabanc pulled by three horses. This image also hinted at the presence of different social groups as one man, possibly a clerk, was wearing a straw boater.

Photographs can record significant events. There was an image of the last election hustings at Bury St Edmunds about 1868. A large group of predominantly well-dressed men, many with top hats, were watching a platform set up in front of the Angel Hotel from which votes were being cast. The use of a secret ballot for voting was introduced in 1872. Two other photographs showed the collection of first old age pension payments in Framlingham and Wickhambrook in 1909. One of these was a postcard.

Stuart Bowell did warn of the need to be cautious in interpreting images. A school photograph had all of the boys smartly dressed in their best clothes and wearing boots. They may not always have looked like this.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 24 January at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Geoffrey Robinson will be speaking about Buffalo Bill. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy