

PONENCIA INAUGURAL

The London Stereoscopic Company (LSC) then and now

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antes y ahora**

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ABSTRACT

Denis Pellerin, photo historian and curator of Dr. Brian May's collection of Victorian stereocards, takes us on a journey back in time from 1854, the year the London Stereoscopic Company –then called the London Stereoscope Company– was created, to its demise in the 1920s and its re-creation by Dr. Brian May in 2008. With documents from his and Dr May's collections, Denis Pellerin will show in full 3D the vital part played by the original L.S.C. in the stereoscopic craze that swept over Britain and France in the late 1850s and the important role its modern counterpart has in the revival of stereoscopy in the 21st century.

Keywords: Stereocards, Victorian era, London, Pellerin, Brian May.

RESUMEN

Denis Pellerin, fotohistoriador y conservador de la colección de tarjetas estereoscópicas victorianas del Dr. Brian May, nos lleva en un viaje en el tiempo desde 1854, año en que se creó la London Stereoscopic Company –entonces llamada London Stereoscope Company–, hasta su desaparición en la década de 1920 y su re-creación por el Dr. Brian May en 2008. Con documentos de sus colecciones y las del Dr. May, Denis Pellerin mostrará en 3D la parte vital que desempeñó la LSC original en la locura estereoscópica que se extendió por Gran Bretaña y Francia a fines de la década de 1850 y el importante papel que tiene su equivalente moderna en el resurgimiento de la estereoscopia en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Tarjetas estereoscópicas, Era Victoriana, Londres, Pellerin, Brian May.

The original L.S.C. (short for London Stereoscopic Company) was born some time in 1854 when two cousins, John Howard Kennard (1829-1896) and George Swan Nottage (1822-1885) started introducing stereo cards bought from Paris in the window of the art repository they had opened at 313 Oxford Street, where they were mostly selling iron bronze statuettes. The stereo cards sold quickly and more had to be imported, then more again, until the two partners decided to forget about bronze models and to specialise instead in the sale of everything stereoscopic. For over a year the company's name appeared in the press either as The London Stereoscope Company or The London Stereoscopic Company and early advertisements make use of one or the other name. The earliest I could find was published in the *Morning Advertiser* two days after Christmas 1855:

THE IMPROVED STEREOSCOPE

We yesterday paid a visit to the London Stereoscope Company's premises, 313, Oxford-street, and had the pleasure of examining a collection of these beautiful instruments. Recent improvements have very much heightened their powers, and they have now the advantage of being adapted to all visions. We examined also a large collection of slides for these instruments, and were much surprised at the perfection to which they have been brought. Some subjects, by Williams¹, are unequalled for sharpness, tone, and beauty – we seemed to be standing amidst the scenes portrayed, so lifelike did they appear. A few exquisite Italian scenes, by distinguished artists, made us almost believe we were in Italy. In a word, the loveliest scenes of nature and the greatest achievements of human genius are, by the magical power of this little instrument, brought, in all their reality, within the circles of our own homes. We cannot recommend to our readers, who have not yet witnessed the effect produced by these instruments, a more elegant treat than to pay a visit to the London Stereoscope Company, and

1 Thomas Richard Williams (1824-1871) was a pupil of Claudet and a pioneer of stereo photography in Britain. He is remembered for his daguerreotype stereoscopic portraits and still lifes which were rarely equalled. He is also the author of a series of sixty stereo views of the village of Hinton Waldrist, Oxfordshire, which were published under the title *Scenes in Our Village*, and are the subject of a book written by Dr. Brian May and Elena Vidal, *A Village Lost and Found* (2009). The author of this article and Dr. May are currently working on a «definitive» book about T. R. Williams that will examine his life and works.



FIG. 1. One of the first successful sets of cards by the London Stereoscopic Company. Albert Smith as Catesby (left) and Thomas Knowle Holmes as Guy Faux (right). The blind stamp on the left of the mount reads London Stereoscopic Company, 313 Oxford Street. Brian May Collection.

judge for themselves. We know nothing so well adapted for a Christmas present – by its ever new and entertaining variety, and by its affording an intelligent amusement for social parties².

Although an ad published in *The Times* in April 1855 still mentions «European artists in iron and photography» as well as the «artistic repository»³, it is one of the last mentions of the bronze figures which were soon completely neglected.

One of the first successful sets of cards published by the London Stereoscopic Company was a couple of photos showing Albert Smith and Thomas Knowle Holmes in their respective parts of Catesby and Guy Faux (a.k.a. Guy Fawkes) for the amateur pantomime «Guy Faux, or a Match for a King» which they set up in April 1855 at the Olympic Theatre for the benefit of writer and journalist Angus Bethune Reach who had been incapacitated by a paralytic illness⁴. The show turned out to be such a success that it was soon revived before the Queen at Drury Lane Theatre. It is not clear, however, when it was decided to immortalise the two main characters for the stereoscope. The cards produced were advertised in the press in July 1855 but the author of the advert below made a mistake in the cast. Holmes was actually playing Guy Faux and Albert Smith was Catesby.

ALBERT SMITH as GUY FAUX, and HOLMES as the DEAD GUY, as played before Her Majesty at Drury-lane. The most laughable slides ever published. The above two beautifully executed photographs, together with a mahogany stereoscope, for 10s 6d. Sent on remittance in stamps or otherwise.

2 *Morning Advertiser*, 27 December 1854, p. 3.

3 *The Times*, 5 April 1855, p. 5.

MARVELS of ART. —The IRON BRONZE and improved STEREOSCOPE and SLIDES. —From 1s. upwards each, 10,000 models, figures and groups, by the first European artists, in iron and photography. —Artistic repository, 313, Oxford-street, two doors from Hanover-square.

4 Angus Bethune Reach (1821-1856) is nearly forgotten nowadays but in his time he was, among other things, a popular novelist, an art-critic for the *Chronicle*, a gossip-columnist for *The Illustrated London News*, a contributor to the satirical journal *Punch* and a travel-writer.

LONDON STEREOSCOPIC COMPANY, 313, Oxford-street, corner of Hanover-square gates. Groups and Views in endless Variety. List Sent Free on Application⁵.

The ad mentions two cards but four were actually made and sold, one of which can be seen above (FIG. 1).

By the end of August 1855, the London Stereoscopic Company could advertise «one thousand beautiful groups and scenes from all parts of the world» and offered a slide for 1 shilling and a stereoscope for 4 shillings and 6 pence. It was still expensive and out of the reach of the lower classes but prices were slowly getting lower.

In October the Company, which was still trying to attract more customers, offered a prize of twenty guineas (quite a fortune in those days) for the best essay on the stereoscope. Contestants had until the first of December to send their text which would then be judged by Scottish physicist and improver of the stereoscope Sir David Brewster. We know that fourteen essays were received but only one having been published it is impossible to judge the quality of the other thirteen. Unsurprisingly, the first prize went to a Scotsman, one of Brewster's fellow teachers at St. Andrew's, William Oughton Lonie (1822-1894), professor of Mathematics at Madras College. A second prize was awarded to another Scotsman, the Reverend Robert Graham (1818-1900), who was then Minister of Abernyte, in Perthshire. In a letter to the London Stereoscopic Company which was printed in 1856 as the frontispice of William Lonie's essay, Brewster justified his choice by the fact that these two essays «gave the most correct account of the laws of Binocular Vision and of the theory of the Stereoscope.»⁶

In September 1855 the Company not only organised a stereoscopic exhibition in its premises but started a new advertising campaign with a question directly addressed to the reader: «HAVE YOU A STEREOSCOPE?»⁷. In December, the question became «HAVE YOU A STEREOSCOPE, GENTLE READER?» and was followed immediately afterwards by the words «If not, at once add this charming discovery of Sir David Brewster's to the pleasures of your home. For social and fireside pleasure it has no equal.»⁸

In November 1855 the London Stereoscopic Company advertised in the press new stereoscopic views of Switzerland «comprising the grandest and loveliest subjects ever seen» and boasted of having «the Largest Collection of Views in Europe»⁹. There is no doubt Nottage and Kennard were thinking big and had invested a lot of money. As early as 18 December they were advertising a stock of 10,000 groups and views, as opposed to the one thousand they had in August.¹⁰

5 *North & South Shields Gazette and Northumberland and Durham Advertiser*, Friday 27 July 1855, p. 8.

6 William Oughton Lonie, *Prize Essay on the Stereoscope*. London: London Stereoscopic Company and Arthur Hall, Virtue and Co., 1856. «The most correct account of the laws of Binocular Vision and of the theory of the Stereoscope» were obviously Brewster's who was involved in an epistolary duel with the inventor of the stereoscope, Charles Wheatstone, in the columns of *The Times* and was in total disagreement with Wheatstone's own theories.

7 *Morning Chronicle*, 14 September 1855, p. 1.

8 *Illustrated London News*, 10 November 1855, p. 559.

9 *Illustrated London News*, 1 December 1855, p. 635.

10 *The Times*, 18 December 1855, p. 1.

CHRISTMAS FESTIVITIES. — The STEREOSCOPE (lenses warranted), 4s. 6d. to 7s. 6d.; 10,000 Groups and Scenes, 1s. to 2s. — Stereoscope Company, 313, Oxford-street, two doors from Hanover-square. «The effect seems almost miraculous; for social and domestic entertainment it has no equal.» — *Morning Herald*. A beautiful selection, with mahogany instruments, packed and sent into the country for 21s.

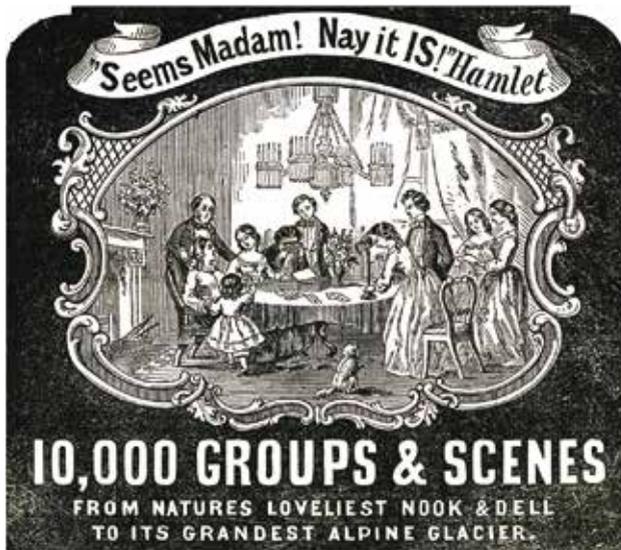


FIG. 2. Woodcut advertising the London Stereoscopic Company. Brian May Collection.

In January 1856 the L.S.C. launched another advertising campaign, using this time a large woodcut representing a family circle of no fewer than ten persons (and a dog) sitting or standing around a table and looking at stereoviews through two lenticular instruments. A partial quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, «Seems Madam! Nay it is» floats in a banner over the scene while underneath, in large lettering one can read the number of groups and scenes in stock and what the latter depict, namely everything, «from Nature's loveliest nook and dell, to its grandest alpine glacier», from the picturesque to the sublime! (FIG. 2).

In May 1856, the LSC published, in the sixth instalment of Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, its first catalogue, listing over eight pages not only the various Brewster stereoscopes they were selling but a large number of stereo cards as well. This was an important step which firmly established them as bona fide dealers in stereoviews.

Two hundred and eighty-six views and groups are actually listed or described, a group of approximately two hundred is mentioned, and an unnumbered series of «numerous similar Subjects» as well as Stereoviews in France, England, Italy, the Rhine, Switzerland and Africa, all on glass, are referred to. For most of the slides with a title, the latter is just a vague description, for example, «Man and Woman in Yard – Snow Scene», or «Men with Truck, and Boy drinking Lemonade». No photographer is credited but nearly all of the images have successfully been attributed by collectors and researchers over the years. There are photos by Thomas Richard Williams (Crystal Palace, First and Second Series of Miscellaneous Subjects), Claude Victoire et/ou Jean-Louis Grillet (Pompeii and Naples), Samuel Poulton (122 Groups and Figures «of the 'Wilkie' character»). The albumen glass slides are all by Claude Marie Ferrier (FIG. 3).

A second, nearly identical L.S.C. catalogue appeared at the end of the treatise on the stereoscope published by Sir David Brewster in the autumn of 1856 under the title, *The Stereoscope, its History, Theory and Construction, with its application to the fine and useful Arts and to Education*.

In December 1856 the London Stereoscopic Company published a third, revised and extended catalogue which appeared in the tenth installment of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*. It was three times bigger than its May predecessor (24 pages instead of 8), listed views which had only been previously alluded to, and added several more series, including *Scenes in Our Village*, by Thomas Richard Williams, *Scenes in the Style of the Court of Louis Quatorze*, by Samuel Poulton, groups from Charles Kean's production of «A Winter's Tale» by Claudius Erskine Goodman, Theatrical and Historical Subjects, by James Elliott, Daguerreotype Statuary, fifty



FIG. 3. Page from the first catalogue issued by the London Stereoscopic Company. Brian May Collection.



FIG. 4. Scene from Charles Kean's production of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, by C. E. Goodman. Brian May Collection.

varied Stereoscopic plates of the Great Crumlin Viaduct in Wales, by William England, a large series of views of Britain, and many more. Over six pages detailed Claude Marie Ferrier's glass views of France, Germany Italy and Switzerland while the catalogue of stereoscopes, cameras, and lenses available for sale spread over three pages (FIG. 4).

Also appearing at the very beginning of the December catalogue was a list of all the agents for the London Stereoscopic Company throughout Britain. Nottage and Kennard understood that in order to expand and sell their products they needed distributors covering the whole country. They must have spent months creating that network, made possible by the development of the



FIG. 5. One of the numerous versions of «The Ghost in the Stereoscope» by the London Stereoscopic Company. Note the blind stamp on the left hand side of the mount. Brian May Collection.

railway in Britain which allowed people and goods to travel the length, width and breadth of the country.

1857 was a very successful year for the L.S.C. In January they came up with the slogan that made them famous, «No Home without a Stereoscope» and tried hard to make it come true by advertising more and getting more agents all over the country. At the end of the year they had a massive commercial hit with the release of several cards under the generic title «The Ghost in the Stereoscope». The idea of producing see-through three-dimensional apparitions had come from chapter XIV of the treatise on Stereoscopy which Sir David Brewster had published the year before¹¹. The Scottish scientist was duly credited on the back of the cards which bore the mention «Kindly suggested by Sir David Brewster, K.H.». The «ghosts» (there are actually dozens of such cards) proved so successful with the public that the demand was soon more than the offer and the L.S.C. had to apologise to their customers as they could not deliver the goods fast enough (FIG. 5).

From then on the L.S.C. grew fast. In late December 1859 they had a clearance sale where one million views and groups were on offer. Earlier that year the L.S.C. had changed its name to The London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company, which they were to keep until the turn of the next century when the London part of the name was dropped. This enabled them to diversify their production and to sell anything photographic and not specifically stereoscopic.

The Company had its finest hour in 1862, with the second London International Exhibition. They paid a very large sum of money to have the privilege to be the sole photographers of the interior of the Exhibition Building and of the goods on display there. In 1851 the stereoscope had been a rather small and unimpressive item out of over 100,000 other exhibits. Eleven years later it enabled visitors to the exhibition to bring back home mementoes of their visit and those who could not make it to London, for financial or other reasons, to get a very good idea of what it had to offer. By August the L.S.C. had published a first series of one hundred stereo-

¹¹ This chapter is entitled «Applications of the Stereoscope to Purposes of Amusement».



FIG. 6. The London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company. Number 68 of their series devoted to the International Exhibition of 1862: «The Reading Girl», by Pietro Magni. Brian May Collection.

scopic cards which comprised «the chief general views of the building, works of art, sculpture, and the leading points of interest in the several courts»¹². By the time the exhibition closed its doors, they were offering over 340 stereoscopic images, nearly half of them statuary. Some of the sculptures exhibited proved more popular than others and out of the three or four that were the public's favourites, the L.S.C. purchased two, Monti's «The Sleep of Sorrow, the Dream of Joy»¹³ and Magni's «The Reading Girl»¹⁴. Pictures of the latter were so much in demand that, at some point during the exhibition, the L.S.C. sold 200 gross¹⁵ of stereos of the Statue –Number 68 in the series– every week! (FIG. 6).

The photographic copies of the «Reading Girl» have had, and still have, such an enormous sale that the profits realised on this picture alone would more than repay the £2000 paid to the Exhibition Company by the Stereoscopic Company for the right of photographing¹⁶.

The L.S.C. survived the decline of the stereoscopic craze soon after the 1862 Exhibition, and the death of the two original managing partners, Nottage in 1885 and Kennard eleven years later. At the turn of the twentieth century they were still one of the largest publishers of photographs and manufacturers of cameras and photographic equipment and during the first World War sold British soldiers Kodak Vest Pocket Cameras. The Company eventually disappeared in the early 1920s, not very long after the photo below was issued as a postcard. It shows the premises of the Company at 108 and 110 Regent Street (FIG. 7).

12 *London Standard*, 16 August 1862, p. 3.

13 This sculpture is part of the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and can be seen in room 122g.

14 The «Reading Girl» is now in exile in Washington D.C. after being sold to an American collector in 2000. If you want to know more about the story and fate of this statue, read the article by Denis Pellerin «The Sad Story of the Reading Girl», in the July/August 2017 issue of the magazine *Stereo World*.

15 A gross is twelve dozen (144). 200 by 144 is 28800!

16 *Leeds Mercury*, 3 November 1862, p. 4.



FIG. 7. Postcard showing the L.S.C. premises in Regent Street around 1920. The back of the card is actually dated 6 July 1920. Author's collection.

There was a long gap of several decades during which the story and even the name of the Company could well have fallen into complete oblivion had not composer, musician, astrophysicist and stereo enthusiast Dr. Brian May decided not only to buy the name and logo of the defunct company but to revive it. That was in 2008 and the only product the company had on offer then was the Owl viewer, inspired by Victorian stereoscopes, designed by Dr. May himself and manufactured in Britain out of polypropylene. The name «Owl» itself comes from the resemblance of the viewer when opened flat to the outline of the hooting nocturnal bird but is also an acronym for Outstanding Wide Lenses. Two sets of stereo cards were produced, showing the band Queen in 3-D then two more about Astronomy. In 2009 Dr. May and Elena Vidal released their book *A Village Lost and Found* but it was not until 2013 that the revived London Stereoscopic Company became their own publisher. By then I had been hired as the curator of Dr. May's extensive collection and had co-authored the first book published under the L.S.C.'s imprint, *Diableries: Stereoscopic Adventures in Hell*. Other books were to follow: *The Poor Man's Picture Gallery* (2014), *Crinoline: Fashion's Most Magnificent Disaster* (2016), *Queen in 3-D* (2017), *George Washington Wilson, Artist and Photographer* (2018), *Mission Moon 3-D* (2018). Other sets of cards were produced, as well as a Lite Owl and an Owl VR Kit – which allows buyers to look at stereos and 3-D videos on their smartphone (FIGS. 8 y 9).

Although a company selling stereoscopic products, the L.S.C. is also on a mission to make stereoscopic 3-D popular again and to share our passion for it with the public by means of articles in magazines, exhibitions¹⁷, workshops, and 3-D talks all over the world. Some of the talks

17 We exhibited stereos at Tate Britain for eleven months. There were other exhibitions at the Foundling Museum in London, Watts Gallery in Guildford, The National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh, La Halle Saint-Pierre in Paris.

were given by Dr. May to audiences of up to 800 people, all wearing Omega Optical multiband 3-D glasses¹⁸.

There are more books in preparation and by early 2020 Dr. May's extensive collection will have become an Incorporated Charitable Organisation which will be able to open its doors –by appointment only– to researchers and curators. It will be called The London Stereoscopic Archive, or L.S.A. for short. Although we do not have the archives of our predecessors¹⁹, we have a large library of books devoted to early photography and the Victorian era as well as over 150,000 stereo images, which make the collection one of the most comprehensive in the world.

It is impossible to tell what the future has in store for Dr. Brian May's L.S.C. and L.S.A. but so far things look pretty good and we are involved in many fascinating projects of our own or in collaboration with institutions, universities, etc. We have also made our predecessors' slogan ours and sincerely hope that in the near future there will be «No Home without a Stereoscope».



FIG. 8. Dr. Brian May holding an Owl VR Kit and a Lite Owl. Photo by the author.



FIG. 9. Dr. Brian May showing Professor Stephen Hawking a twelve minute 3-D video made by the author of this article as a tribute to professor Hawking. It features 3-D images of space on a soundtrack played by Dr. May on his Red Special guitar. Photo by the author.

18 In 2018 the L.S.C. gave over twenty-two 3-D talks in five different countries and in 2019 twenty 3-D talks in seven different countries.

19 The Hulton-Getty archive in London houses negatives, prints and sample book from the original London Stereoscopic Company.