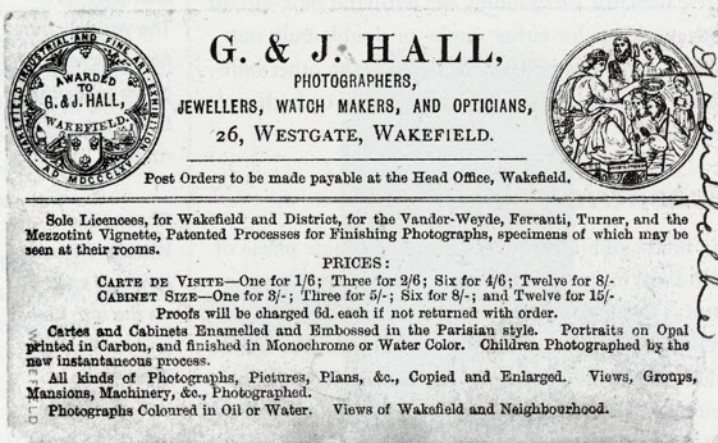


Victorian marketing techniques

What do the Cartes reveal?

By Ron Cosens



The next part of the story of "Cartomania" from Ron Cosens, based on his collection of 100,000 cartes de visite.

PHOTOGRAPHY was very competitive, sometimes with many studios in the same street, so how did the Victorian photographers go about marketing? Let's study the cards to see what clues they give us. The main product was the carte de visite portrait which, after 1866, was joined by its big brother - the cabinet card. However, because albumen prints could be reproduced easily, cards could be promoted in many other ways to increase turnover.

● **Copying** - As customers could not produce photographs themselves, the reprint market was enormous and cards show phrases like "Copies can always be had" or "Negatives kept for 10 years". The converse approach was "Negatives destroyed after 7 days, unless Registered, charge - One Shilling". A nice little earner! Individual reprints were often demanded when people died, sometimes being pasted onto mounts with black borders whereas bulk copies were produced by specialists such as the British & Foreign Copying Company (London).

● **Colouring** - The Victorians had a large pool of artists who excelled at painting miniatures. When photography threatened their livelihoods, many switched to colouring photographs and most photographers offered "Copies can be obtained in oils and water colours".

● **Enlarging** - Many advertised "This portrait is especially adapted for producing enlarged copies (even to

life size) ...". These could also be framed but were expensive so 'Portrait Clubs' offered credit terms, e.g. "Life size oil paintings - 5 guineas by monthly subscription of 1 guinea".

● **Publishing** - There was a huge market to satisfy eager collectors. Consider the lack of illustrations in newspapers and books and the reason is clear. Topographical views formed one of the main subjects and, whilst many photographers advertised "local views", the firms of G W Wilson, James Valentine, Francis Bedford and Francis Frith dominated the market. Pictures of famous people were also good money spinners and many a family album contained images of royalty, actors or politicians.

Cartes were also used to market table water, hotels, machinery etc. Others were produced for politicians and clergy to distribute to voters or flocks. G & J Hall did not miss a trick whilst Garnier Arsene (Guernsey) even advertised his **WHOLE BUSINESS** for £1000.

● **Branches** - Having only one studio restricted profitability so many photographers expanded by opening additional branches, listing them on their cards as they did so. Some photographers even opened branches abroad in Pretoria, Valparaiso, Paris, New York, Chicago etc. My real favourite is "Paris, Nice, Cannes and, during the summer, at Scarborough" Wow!

● **Prices** - As today, Victorian photographers suffered the dilemma "Can lower prices mean more profit?" The Jubilee Photo Co. (London) was not at all modest, claiming "Astonishingly low priced lines" and "Such good work was never before offered for less than double the above prices" and the Economic Portrait Association allowed 'club members' to buy 1/- tickets in advance and purchase cartes at 50% discount. Economic by name: economic by nature!

● **Promotion** - Most photographers relied on their studio's prominent location, often the High Street or the Market Place. However, Sarony (Scarborough) produced cartes with a glowing testimonial on the back to promote his business. Woodhouse (Lynn) was even less shy, claiming "...vignettes not equalled in Lynn, nor surpassed in the WORLD". Photographers often advertised in local directories and newspapers. There are valuable compilations of this information including those by Michael Pritchard (London), Peter Stubbs (Edinburgh) and the RPS (various UK towns).

Another form of promotion was to dispel doubts. For instance "Persons who have never had a successful photograph taken are invited to give us a sitting as we can insure (sic) a satisfactory portrait in every case". Another championed the virtues of electric light as "...not the least trying to the weakest sight" whilst another points out "Cartes taken without headrests". Robinson & Thompson (Liverpool) even offered "This PHOTOGRAPH is merely a rough proof. Only the expression and position should be judged of. After copies will be much superior in finish; all lines, freckles and heavy shadows will then be softened down".

● **Skills** - Photography is a 'people' business and staff skills are key marketing assets. Some relied on the drive and charisma of the proprietor. Sarony (Scarborough) had terrific personal charm and an

Above: Carte from G and J Hall, with a very comprehensive list of services.



enquiring mind. His posing chair, which gained 'universal' approval, and his improvements to style and processes kept him in the public eye so that he could always charge top rates from rich clients. Others, like Netterville Briggs, gained national recognition by illustrating medals awarded. These aid dating as cards were frequently redesigned as additional awards were achieved.

Another form of promotion was to list patrons. These ranged from "The people's photographer" to Gladstone, Queen Victoria, Napoleon and exotic patrons like King of the Sandwich Islands, Maharajah Duleep Singh of India and Akbaloddowla ex-king of Oude. Photographers liked to emphasise 'excellence by association' such as "Many years Principal Photographer to Messrs. Dickinsons" or "Late of Elliott & Fry, London". Madame Brunner (Sunderland) proudly points out she was a "Pupil of Mayall".

Many others included the Masonic emblem on their cards whilst some emphasised how long their business had been established e.g. "Established 1850" or "Established over 40 years". Unusual skills were extolled. Jackolett (Northampton) quoted "On parle Francaise et Italienne" (why?) and Stearn (Cambridge), who photographed university students, claimed "On Parle Francais" and "Man Spricht Deutsch" - giving them the edge over Hills & Saunders who specialised in the same area.

Another form of self promotion was to call yourself a "School of Photography". The London Stereoscopic Company offered "Free lessons in photography" and "Special dark-rooms and studios reserved for amateurs" whilst Bustin (Hereford) stated

"Amateurs desiring instruction are invited to call". This emphasised skills and product range to increase income.

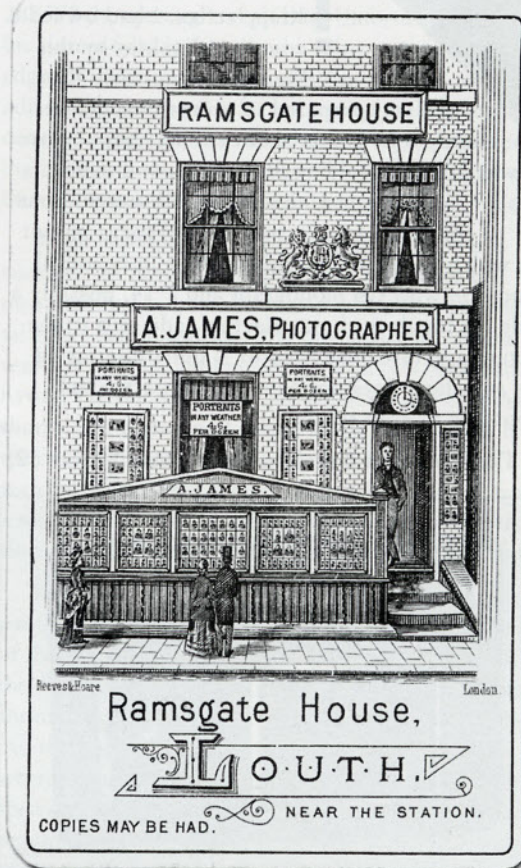
● **Studios** - Victorian photographers were proud of their studios and illustrated them on their cards. I have over 38 examples but I'm still looking for one from Sarony. The studio of A James (Louth) is typical. The cards also describe unusual features including "... only elevator connected with photography in the WORLD", "Studios on ground floor", "...studio approached by a lift constructed on the most approved patents....", "Dressing rooms and lady attendants" and "General public studio 43ft. long". The "Revolving Studio" (London) was really interesting as it followed the sun.

● **Itinerants** - Other, more itinerant, descriptions include "Bailey's Auction Vans and Photographic Studio in this district for a short time", "Dark carriage for taking groups, views, parties at own residences" and simply "257th Regiment" (E Stock).

● **Mounts** - Some photographers tried cards with gold, silver, red or serrated edges or cards with sharp points making them very difficult to slip into the standard album of the time. But probably the most unusual mount of all came from Mr Cornwall from Aberdeen who created a photograph of examples of his work and pasted it onto the reverse of his mounts instead of having them printed.

So there we have it. Successful businesses never could afford to stand still. What is so interesting, and what fascinates me about the hobby of Cartomania, is that so much evidence is contained on those tiny 4 x 2 1/2 inch cards. All you have to do is look!

Far left: An elegant display of medals won by Netterville Briggs.



Left: The studio of A James in Louth. Is it still standing today?