

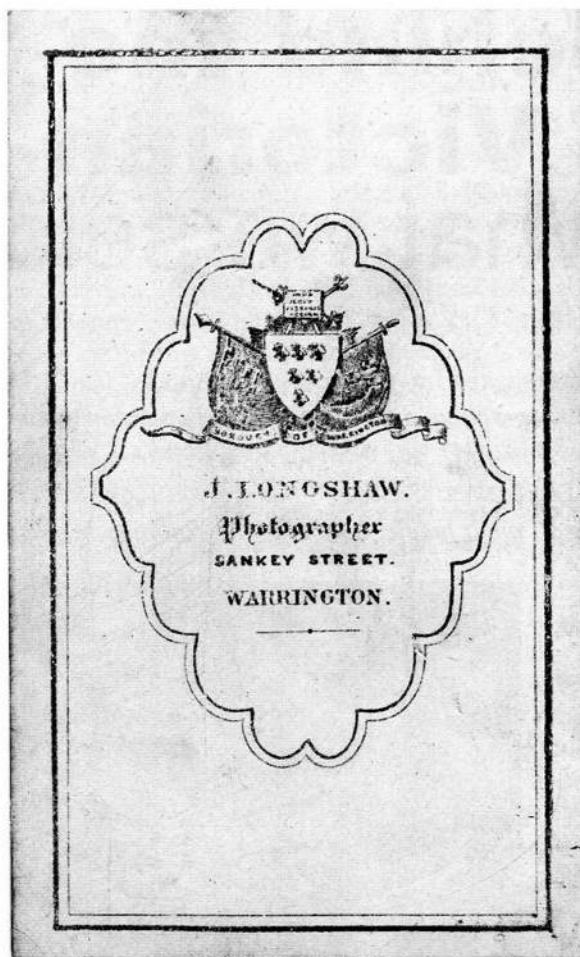
Behind the Scenes in a Victorian studio: What we seldom see

by Ron Cosens

A long time ago I was lucky enough to visit David Hooper from Chester and, amongst other things, bought several hundred 3¼ x 4¼ glass plate negatives. David told me they were from a studio in Warrington and I put them away in a drawer to play with later. Just recently, and now many years later, I took them out again, had a good look, found them fascinating and had them professionally scanned - what magic! Suddenly the scanning brought them to life and revealed so much detail.



Picture 1 - A scan of one of Longshaw's negatives



Pictures 2 & 3 - A carte de visite (front and back) that matches the image on picture 1

First of all I needed to find out who had taken the photographs so I identified the likely photographers that operated in Warrington during the 1860s and 1870s from my UK database. After scrutinising each scan and comparing them to my cartes de visite - suddenly, I found a match and therefore definite proof (see Pictures 1, 2 & 3) - they had been taken by John Longshaw who had a studio in Warrington from 1858 until his death in 1875. The studio was continued in his name for another four years under the management of his eldest son Edward. There was another son called John junior, not to be confused with John senior, who ran his own studio in Leftwich, Cheshire until at least 1891; but by 1901, at the age of 52, he was described in the census as a newsagent's assistant in Llandudno. Strange world.

I have chosen a number of the scanned negatives to illustrate what went on behind the scenes in a Victorian studio in the 1860s and 1870s - things that are rarely seen when studying a collection of finished cartes de visite of that period.

Although the negatives are not always in the best of condition it is possible to 'mend' them electronically and Sandy Barrie, a very good friend from Australia who is a renowned retoucher, has worked his magic on several of the pictures already - see Pictures 4 & 5.

The negatives selected fall into three main categories: (1) those that show parts of the studio that are omitted in the final print, (2) those that have been involved in creating copies and (3) those that needed to be improved.

Negatives that give us an insight into the inside of a studio.

The same picture as above, but uncropped (Picture 6), reveals a number of interesting aspects of the studio. There is a head brace on the left hand side - obviously not of any use for a large group. There are also two or three spare painted backgrounds stacked up against the wall on the left. These would have been used for other portraits, especially for those of people on their own or in small groups.

On both sides, connected to the glass ceiling, there are cords that would have been used to move the blinds; thereby adjusting the amount and angle of the natural lighting to suit each particular shot. No artificial lighting in those days.

The plain background is hung on a simple rail and a curtain, which is also on a rail, can be pulled along to cover as much of the background as felt artistically appropriate. The front edge of the carpet is plainly in view and is laid on bare wooden boards.

The photographer has struggled to keep the front row and the back row in focus. The two men at the very back are definitely not as clear as those at the front. A reason for this was the depth of field; given the same lens and aperture, the further the photographer was away from the subject the greater the depth of field would have been. Had the photographer framed the shot closely the depth of field would have been much shallower.

The main reason for the amount of spare area around the



Picture 4 - Original plate - and - Picture 5 - A fine example of a plate retouched by Sandy Barrie.



Picture 6 - Scan from the negative that has not been cropped and that shows lots of interesting details of the studio.



Picture 7 - We can see even more of the studio when the camera is moved back to accommodate a large group

subject was the difference between the quarter plate negative and the final cut size of the carte de visite image. The plate was $3\frac{1}{4}$ " x $4\frac{1}{4}$ " while the CdV print with trimming etc. could be up to an inch smaller all round.

Picture 7 shows what happens when a large group is taken and the camera has to be moved back to accommodate it.



Picture 8 - Mother, on the left is giving a re-assuring hand to her darling daughter who is balancing on a chair

It reveals again that the studio is made up of wooden panels fixed together in the most basic style - merely a shed with no plasterboard nor paint. Lines have been scribed on the plate to indicate the extent of the albumen print which was to be made and affixed to a carte de visite mount.

The photo is not sharply in focus with the first two rows being acceptably so but the third row is very soft indeed. Another reason for the out of focus people is the need for a compromise between focal length, aperture and exposure time. The photographer appears to have focused mainly on the middle row of the group. Even on a small quarter plate camera the focal length would have been long (between 3½" to 5") and when focused at 15 feet, the depth of field would be shallow. The photographers of the era were hamstrung as they could not use a smaller aperture to get extra depth of field without increasing the exposure time. This was really the photographer's 'catch 22' dilemma.

In the wet plate era, studio photographers were usually required to use a neck brace for their sitter to keep their head still, even for a single portrait, but with several people in a group the chance of someone moving during the exposure increased exponentially to the number of people involved, especially when babies or animals were included. Punch magazine has many jokes on this subject alone - as illustrated in the wonderful 'Punch in Camera-Land' books.

Picture 8 shows that mother was often in the studio to give a helping hand. In this case she is on the left of the child

and kindly holding her dress for her. Probably an act of reassurance as the little girl is balancing on a chair. Mother would not have been seen in the final print and her arm, presumably, would have been touched out. It is unfortunate that the lighting has shown up the creases in the painted cloth background.

The portrait in Picture 9 shows a young man leaning on a chair to give him stability and to enable him to stay still. This means that he did not need to use the posing stand so it has been parked on the right hand side and, intentionally, out of the picture. Images of posing stands are quite rare.

A negative number or sitting reference number has been scratched onto the negative for future use. It is clearly visible in the, unwanted, right hand margin. Also evidence of the wire used to hold the glass plate in the plate holder can be seen at the bottom right hand corner of the image. It is evident from this negative, and many others, that the photographer always left an ample margin around his subject which he knew would be cropped off for the final print.

Picture 10 of a young lady leaning on a fancy pillar has writing scratched into the left hand side of the plate (see the close up, flipped image at Picture 11 for more detail). According to this it is negative number 1568 and she is Mary Baxter from Acton Grange; a township in Runcorn parish, Cheshire about 2½ miles SW of Warrington.

Photographers often put objects like chairs & plinths in photos for people to hold onto to keep them still. Neck



Picture 9 - A rare sight of a posing stand shown on the right along with a negative number scratched into the emulsion.

braces would keep the heads and upper body still but fidgety hands were always a problem; hence many poses show people holding props or leaning on things.

Negatives that show how photographs were copied

Many customers required extra copies of photographs at a later date to send to friends and relatives and they were not able to make copies themselves in the 1860s.

Therefore, they usually went back to the original photographer to have extra prints made from the original negatives.

However, there were certain instances where this was not possible. If the original photograph was a daguerreotype or an ambrotype there was no negative available as the processes did not produce one. The only option was to take a photograph of the original. The example of the lady in Picture 12 shows where the original photograph (a glass ambrotype) had been taken from its frame and held in place on a wooden board by large headed nails. Many years later Kodak made pins with large glass heads especially for the same purpose.

It is not clear why the original of the soldier (Picture 13), which is probably an ambrotype, was copied so that the image was so small on the plate. This must have reduced



Picture 12 - An ambrotype taken from its case and pinned to a board ready for re-photographing

the quality of the copy but it is possible that it was done to make a small locket size print.

In Picture 14 of a soldier the photographer copied a daguerreotype which would have been produced originally on a thin metal plate. The surface would have been very delicate and subject to damage as in this case - notice the many fine lines on the image and the finger prints that can actually be seen most clearly on the soldier's shoulder and in several places around the margin.

When a customer moved to another location and he or she could not go back to the photographer who took their carte de visite in the first place; they had to visit a local photographer and have the original carte de visite copied.

The copy shown in Picture 15 was taken in Warrington but, unusually, it even shows the name of the original photographer who was Thomas Jones from Ludlow. It is unlikely that this detail would have been visible in the final print.

Picture 10 (left) - This young lady is identified by the writing scratched into the negative on the left hand side.

Picture 11 (below) - Detail of the inscription on the previous picture.





Picture 13 - Another ambrotype which is photographed at a distance to make the image smaller; probably for headshot for a locket.

Of course, one other reason for needing copy negatives of the photographer's own work occurred because of acci-



Picture 14 - A daguerreotype ready for copying; including damaging FINGERPRINTS.

dents - glass and gravity don't mix, usually with shattering results.

Negatives that needed 'improving'

Vignetting, as in Picture 16, was sometimes caused accidentally by someone trying to shade the lens in a poor way



Picture 15 - A carte de visite originally taken by a different photographer is ready for copying.



Picture 16 - An unintentional vignette effect.



Picture 17 - Varnish has been used on only part of the negative to aid retouching.



Picture 18 - A very neat vignette probably done by using a paper mask.

or using the wrong lens hood or the wrong internal baffle within the camera body; often done when smaller format images were wanted with larger glass negative sizes. This could also have happen if the curtains in the skylight were drawn too tightly, thereby making a narrow shaft of light which illuminated just the subject and not enough of the background.

On the negative relating to Picture 17, the photographer has treated the area which includes the boy differently from the rest of the negative. This effect often happened when retouching varnish was applied to negatives to give them 'tooth' i.e. something to stick too. The 'tooth' was often applied only to the area needed, the face mainly, not over the entire negative.

Sometimes the varnish yellowed or aged, or conversely it protected the area applied to whilst the rest of the negative aged. It was a long time, probably the 1890s, before it was realised that sulphur was the enemy of photographic silver. Many of the old time retouching varnishes were just normal matt, art varnishes and were not formulated for archival stability.

Pictures 18 & 19 show two similar operations but each designed to produce a different result.

The negative of the lady's portrait (Picture 18) had been masked, probably with black paper, to create this very neat vignette effect.

The gentleman's portrait (Picture 19) would have been done by 'opaquing'(or 'blocking out') which was the only way to isolate one subject from within a pair or group.

Opaquing was done with a red, gouache water colour. This would dry and not allow the light to expose through to the



Picture 19 - Another example of blocking out; but not so neatly done.

paper but could be washed off the negative, if needed, to allow printing from the full negative at a later stage. Gouache was most commonly applied to the back (non emulsion side) of the plate and would hold onto the glass but would often flake and fall off in time; whereas retouching varnish would stick to the plain side of the



Picture 20 - This glass plate appears to have been cut down but what did granny do wrong?

glass and allow the gouache to adhere to that side much better. Some of the lower quality studios just used cheap black or red paint.

The image of one and a half people (see Picture 20) is an intriguing one. However, on closer inspection it is can be seen that a larger plate has been cut down. Did the man want his portrait without showing his wife (ex wife)? It is



Picture 22 - Two is company BUT there is also a third. You can just see an obscured image of a man in the background.



Picture 21 - Someone else eliminated; but the reason may be benign.

possible that the man had died and his family wanted a memorial photograph of him to send to friends and relatives - but why cut the plate? Or was it broken? We will never know.

Another example (Picture 21) also shows someone being



Picture 23 - A photographic copy of a pre photography silhouette



Picture 24 - A blocked out copy of an ambrotype of a pre-photography painted portrait.

'eliminated'! This approach was more commonly done for a mourning locket or to send to a relative of his own side of the family or, if the man was actually still alive, as a memento for a child to take to boarding school.

The ghostly image at Picture 22 appears to be a copy of an



Picture 25 - A copy of an ambrotype which has been accidentally pseudo solarised.

ambrotype. But why eliminate the man in the background (you can just see him) or half eliminate the elderly lady on the right? Was there a family falling out or a skeleton in the cupboard? What had granddad and grandma done to deserve this? Or had the young woman died and a memorial photograph was needed of her alone?

Picture 23 shows a copy of a pre-photography silhouette. The original may have been painted on paper or cut out of black paper with scissors and pasted onto a white mount. In the days before photography silhouettes were the cheapest and most common form of 'portrait' as they were what people could afford. Hand painted lockets and even small portrait paintings were too expensive for the working man. When families grew larger, copying was the only way that each child could have an image of an ancestor. Fairground paper-cutting silhouette makers were still in business in the 1950s.

Picture 24 is from an eerie negative that appears to be a copy of an ambrotype which itself is a copy of an earlier hand painted portrait. It has been taken at a distance and has been blocked out so that only the central portion of the picture remains. The fact that it does not fill the frame is probably because it was intended to fit into a picture frame with a small opening.

In the 1860s customers had to order the plate size and even the picture frame before the copy (or the sitting) was taken. If the sizes were changed later the whole order would have had to be redone. Today the finished print size would be decided by enlarging.

Picture 25 is a copy of an ambrotype which has resulted in a strange ethereal effect! This was almost certainly caused by pseudo-solarisation when the plate was accidentally



Picture 26 - A really crude 'studio' set up outside in the yard.

exposed to light whilst in the developer or in the early stages of fixing. Development would have been carried out by inspection and the possible causes of solarisation would have included a light leak in the dark room or that the lights were put on too early or that the plate was put into a fixer that was too weak or exhausted. When done intentionally, this effect can sometimes lead to prize winning images!

One more interesting image - outdoors. Not all studio portraits were taken indoors. It was not unusual, even in the early days, to move operations into the back yard. This was sometimes done on dull days when there was insufficient light in the studio - before the days of artificial studio lighting.

Picture 26 is a wonderfully illustrative shot which gives some insight into how this was done. In this case the painted background has been hung roughly on the brick wall and there is a carpet on the cobbles. Even an indoors chair has been brought outside but the finished carte de visite would have been well trimmed to look as if the portrait had been taken indoors.

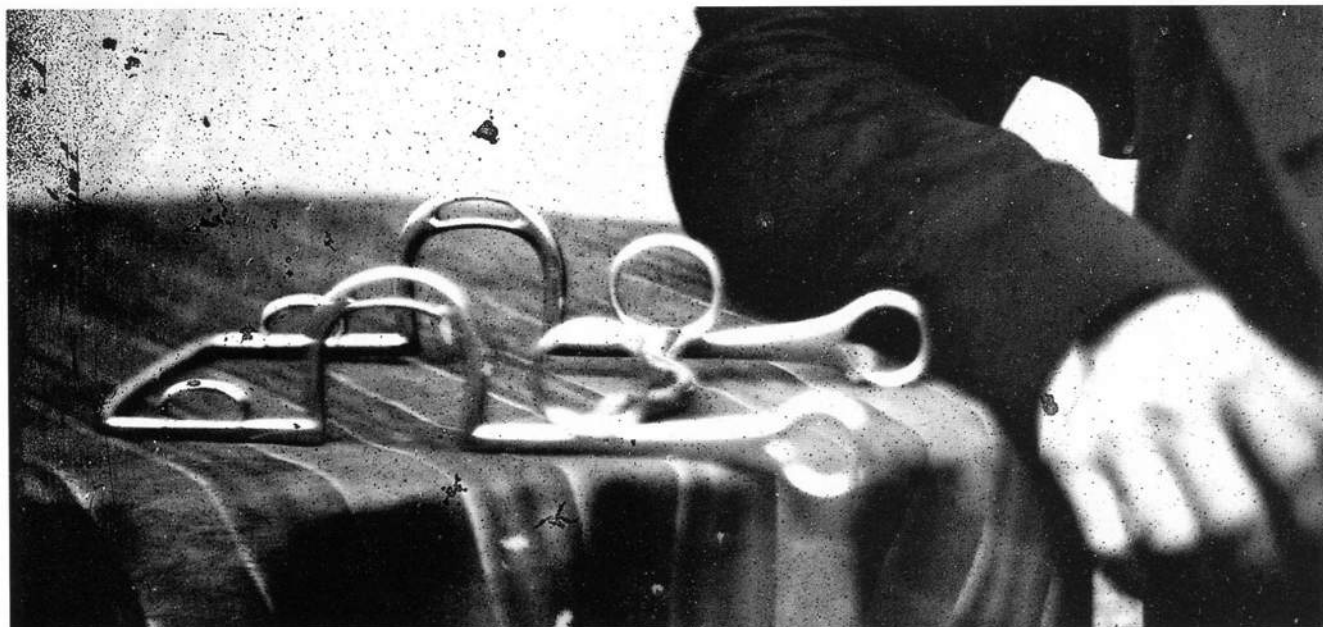
The crude setup has resulted in a creased background which itself is somewhat crudely painted in an attempt to look like someone's library in an era when few of the working classes could even read, let alone owned books.

This is where the term 'backyarder' came from when relating to photographers that took portraits in the customer's backyard because it was too dark inside the house. In this case we know it was taken by a studio photographer but this type of photograph was usually made by an itinerant photographer who would carry his rolled up background, carpet and even the chair on a buggy or hand cart around the district whilst soliciting home portrait sittings.

Surprisingly, top hats were common even among the working classes at that time.

And yet one more interesting image. There are many more plates in the archive but I am just taking this opportunity to pick the brains of our knowledgeable club members.

Picture 27 - A proud gentleman showing off his - what??



Can anyone tell me what the instruments are on the gentleman's table (Picture 27)? I am told by Marcel Safier, our club member from Brisbane, Australia who is a doctor, that they are not medical; are they to do with horses, maybe?

I hope you have enjoyed this peep behind the scenes into an early Victorian studio.

If anyone is interested in exploring this old Warrington archive in more detail, please get in touch with me at ron.cosens@btinternet.com

Thank you so much to Sandy Barrie, a good friend and photohistorian from Australia who provided much of the technical content for this article. (See <http://www.cartedevise.co.uk/more-info/about-2/sandy-barrie/>)

