

Cartomania

Collecting Cartes de Visite and Cabinet Cards

By Ron Cosens

Cartes de visite are those ubiquitous little sepia portraits that every Victorian family, at some stage, slipped into their lovely leather albums which can be so finely adorned with decorated pages and bright brass clasps. This is the first of a series on cartes de visite, cabinet cards and related Victoriana, based on Ron Cosens' collection of more than 100,000 items.

THE carte de visite was patented in France in 1854 by Andre Adolphe Eugene Disderi and became the first type of photograph to be produced *en masse*. The images, at approximately 2.25 inches wide by 3.5 inches tall, were usually taken in multiples of eight or less. They were small enough to allow the photographer to take eight images on a single plate in a whole plate camera fitted with four lenses and a repeating back.

The images were cut up and pasted onto 'standard' card mounts measuring 2.5 x 4 inches which were personalised and purchased by the photographers as stationery items from such multi-national companies as Marion, Osborne and J J Atkinson. The facility to

Above right: A fantastic photograph of a daring (and well dressed) photographer taking a picture looking north up Fifth Avenue in New York. Interestingly, the camera must be taking a shot at right angles. Half a stereo card.

Right: Half a stereo card showing a beach photographer's set up at the entrance to the sands at Bridlington (East Yorkshire)

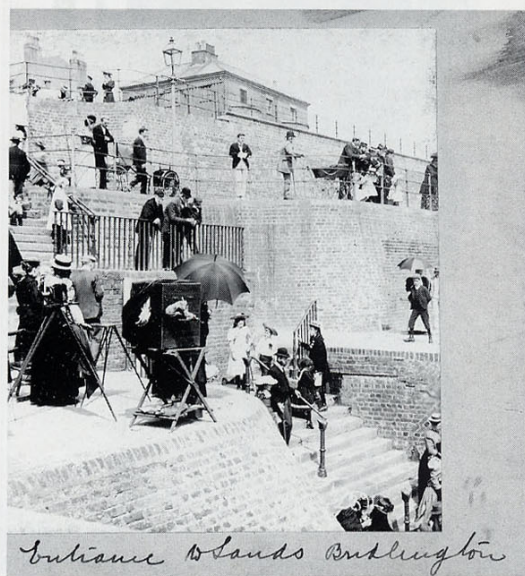


take, develop and print multiple photographs on a single plate ensured that within a few years they became economical enough to be enjoyed by a huge number of people.

The economics were also assisted by the use of the negative /positive process which allowed photographers to produce many copies with new found ease. This had not been feasible with the daguerreotype or the ambrotype. In fact, the market for extra copies at the time of the sitting and for copies many years later provided a good source of income, and was heavily advertised on the back of most carte de visite mounts. This ability to reproduce in bulk later laid the foundations for the original Victorians to collect pictures of famous people, topographical views, works of art and many other strange and interesting subjects.

Despite all of the advantages, the carte de visite did not really pick up in popularity in France until 1859 or 1860. There is an interesting tale of how Napoleon III, on his way to war in Italy in 1859, stopped at Disderi's studio in Paris to have his photograph taken. A marketing man's dream, if true!

In London, the carte de visite gained considerable popularity in the summer of 1860 when the well known society photographer, J E Mayall, produced a set of photographs of the Royal family. From around 1860, there were literally hundreds of millions of portrait cartes de visite produced each year and, over the years to come, collectable cartes de visite of famous



people etc. were produced and bought from publishers and stationers by an eager clientele. Cartomania had arrived.

Michael Pritchard in his excellent, pioneering book on London studios illustrated quite clearly the growth of photographers in the capital alone - reaching nearly 300 by the end of the 1860s and remaining around that figure well into the 1900s.

By the mid 1860s photographers were starting to look for a new format which would revitalise flagging sales and in 1866 the London firm of Window & Bridge started to promote the Cabinet Card, the carte de visite's bigger brother. The cabinet was constructed in exactly the same way as the carte de visite but measured 4 x 5.5 inches and was stuck onto a mount measuring 4.25 x 6.5 inches.

Again the standardisation of mount size and the production of albums to accommodate them soon allowed cabinet cards, with their bigger and more impressive images, to become as popular as cartes de visite and the two formats ran side by side until their gradual decline in the years shortly after the Queen's death in 1901. Like cartes de visite, cabinet cards were produced in huge quantities for the collectors' market and images of many well known and lesser well known actors and actresses were added.

Why collect cartes de visite and cabinet cards?

Like most collectables, the more you collect the more interesting they become as the less obvious aspects are discovered and unveiled. Cartes de visite and cabinet cards have all of the characteristics of a real collectable. They are

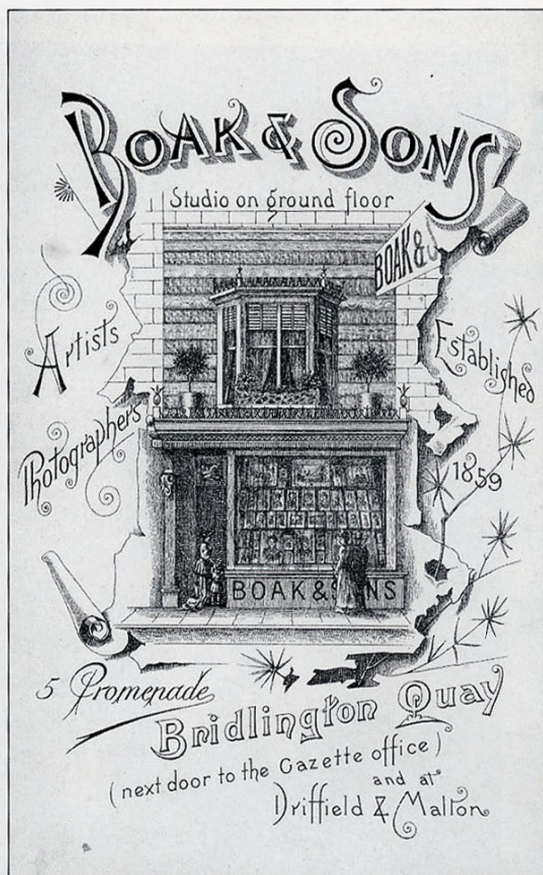
- small
- reasonably priced, although with some rare and valuable jewels to look out for



Above: A magnificent CdV by Disderi & Co. (Paris) of the French Prince Imperial dressed up in a miniature uniform of the day. The hand colouring is superb.



Left: Anyone for tea? Two young ladies, a tiny tea set and three (yes three) favourite dollies. An absolutely charming cabinet photo by Wilson of Grange over Sands



Right: One of many studios illustrated on the back of cartes or cabinet mounts - here on a cabinet. Mr Boak's descendants still live nearby in Pickering (North Yorkshire)

- easy to categorise
- easy to display
- nice to look at when 'all lined up' in a row
- multi-faceted so that you can never know everything, nor have everything.

And even better, some people still throw them away - although this is not so common these days.

As with most popular collectables, it is really easy to specialise. We can specialise with cartes de visite just as easily as we tend to do with our cameras. With cartes de visite, you can collect backs, fronts and even sides! "Get a life" I hear you say - well, it's true. They are all interesting and they all tell a tale. More and more people are beginning to discover this whether they collect geographically (particular countries, counties or towns), by subject (military, famous people, topographical etc.), by specific photographers or in some other specialist way. But we are not just talking about fun. There is definitely a more serious side to this particular obsession.

Victorian photographs as a research tool

Can you imagine life without photographs? Think of your daily papers and magazines, posters and adverts - not to mention the ubiquitous TV. Compare the Times to the tabloids. Compare 1850 to 1950. Of course there were engravings but these were laborious and slow, and it does not take a lot of imagination to realise how photography rapidly touched almost every aspect of life from family to leisure, education, religion and art as well. This means that lots of people

want to know what photographs can tell them about their own special interests. These interests can range from

- family history (dating images, sitters' names)
- local history (topography, local personalities, photographers' names and addresses)
- social history (famous people, sports and leisure, military)
- everyday living (clothes, spectacles, parasols, furniture, fabrics, carpets etc. etc.)
- typographic design
- ... and many more.

The outcome of this interest is usually for leisure or education and covers research for, amongst other things, publications, exhibitions and the visual arts. But information is no good if you can't get at it.

The archive and its database

My Archive consists of

- about 100,000 cartes de visite / cabinet cards
- several thousand large format photographs (mainly topographical)
- photographs of people with cameras
- some ephemera (e.g., photographer's letterheads/invoices)
- photographic prize medals
- over 250 books on Victorian photography and many written articles.

These are all being linked together through a specially designed database which will allow the data to be retrieved quickly and painlessly. Of course, this is a never ending job, but sufficient progress has been made to date so as to be able to answer most questions that are asked of it.

The Cartes de Visite and Cabinet Cards: The main collection of cards is held in alphabetical order by photographer's name. This enables the many different styles to be compared and put in chronological order. A significant number of cards are filed separately as 'Specials.' These are filed by image subject (military, children, beards, etc.), because of the information written or printed on them (instructions, messages, sitter's name etc.) or because of their physical characteristics (shape, thickness, etc.).

All Specials are being put on the database as a priority so that the categories and the photographers can be cross-referenced (i.e. all of the photographs by a particular photographer can be located even if some of them are not under the photographer's name in the main archive). Over 5000 cards are annotated with dates and many of them are also annotated with a sitter's name. Being able to date your Great, Great Granny (and other subjects) is my real core interest. In addition, several thousand more cards have just the sitter's name noted on them. Dates and names are an invaluable source for family history researchers.

There are also many from abroad and I am particularly interested in networking with other researchers

and collectors like myself from different countries around the world. So, I would be delighted if you could get those overseas contacts of yours to email me on ron.cosens@btinternet.com.

Large Format Photographs: There are many large format topographical photos by such photographers as James Valentine of Dundee, George Washington Wilson of Aberdeen, Francis Frith and many others. Of course, they pre-date postcards by several decades so they contain a treasure trove of older images of places, buildings, transport and traditions. As yet, these are not databased but they will be in due course.

Photographs of People with Cameras: There is a small collection of actual photographs of people with their cameras. They are in various formats from carte de visite to stereo card to large format and include people from all walks of life from professionals to amateurs. They are fascinating in themselves, especially when the photographer's name is known.

Ephemera: There is something particularly exciting about a letter or invoice from a well known photographer. A little imagination and you can see him or her sitting down, checking it and adding a signature. A rather special and personal link to the past.

Photographic Prize Medals: There are a number in the collection but pride of place must go to the ones awarded to H P Robinson. An added bonus is when the medals themselves are illustrated on the back of the photographer's carte de visite or cabinet cards. Provenance indeed!

The Library: I have over 250 books on Victorian photography as well as over 200 documents and a further 200 articles. These are all databased with specific references to any pages where the photographer's portrait, signature or studio is illustrated. Many articles written about a specific photographer are also logged and more are being added all the time. The photographs of studios are particularly interesting and

the illustrations of photographer's signatures can be invaluable when trying to authenticate an image.

Research opportunities

The database is extensive and is continuing to build day by day. However, specific questions can easily be researched even in its current form. Of course, I am very aware that the club already has members who are very knowledgeable on Victorian photography. This is clear from the excellent articles that have been published in Photographica World over the last couple of years. However, my central interest is in everything to do with cartes de visite and cabinet cards and even more so in being able to date them with accuracy. Dating and research is obviously much easier and more accurate when there is a large volume of information available and I am always looking for more cards to add to the archive.

Information needs to be used and I am more than happy to co-operate with any enthusiast where the archive can help them with their ongoing research. Just ask.

Future Articles

There are so many angles to a carte de visite, that I plan to pen further articles on some of the more interesting and esoteric facets of Cartomania. For next time - photography was such a competitive business as studios sprang up all over the place, sometimes with a dozen or more in the same street, that I thought it would be interesting to write an article on what clues the cartes and cabinets themselves can give us as to how the Victorian photographer went about his marketing and sales.

I do hope that many of you will join with me and share your knowledge of and enthusiasm for this fascinating and socially important phenomenon that swept the world in the second part of the nineteenth century.



Left: A typical cabinet street scene showing the busy traffic in the Boulevard Montmartre (Paris). As a bonus, the studio of Ch. Reutlinger is clearly visible on the right hand side.