

Forensic Expert Brings New Dimension To Historic Photos

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Dr Ian Turner, left, and Dr John Bradley, with the stereoview headsets

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Derbyshire-based photo historian Dr John Bradley called in the expertise of University forensic scientist Dr Ian Turner to try to discover who had produced an intriguing set of 19th century stereoscopic [photographs](#) - many of which depict local Derbyshire scenes.

Stereoscopic photography was discovered by the eminent Victorian scientist Sir Charles Wheatstone in the 1840s at the very birth of photography. He showed that if two photographs were taken from a few inches apart - at about the same distance as that between the human eyes, and then viewed through a special viewer, the result was a scene with a complete sense of depth - what we now term 3-D.

The same principles are still in use today in 3-D movies, 3-D comics and devices such as the Viewmaster 3-D picture viewer.

Stereoscopic photographs became a hugely popular Victorian collectable, with millions being sold every year, until they were eventually replaced by the picture postcard as a cheap holiday souvenir.

Dr Bradley, who is based in Ashover, has thousands of such stereoviews in his collection. Images in the collection include popular UK tourist sites such as the Isle of Man, Scotland, Scarborough and Bridlington.

However, one important group of photographs remained unattributed because the photographer had not printed their name on the cards. This 'unknown' group of pictures had some similarities to photographs that were known to be taken by the famous Derbyshire photographer Alfred Seaman, of Chesterfield. There was a hidden clue - handwriting on the cards, where the photograph's title had been written under each picture.

Dr Bradley called in University of Derby [forensic science](#) expert Dr Ian Turner to identify the handwriting on the unnamed photos to see if they could be matched to the handwriting on the cards that were known to be by Seaman.

After painstaking analysis, Dr Turner was able to determine that the writing was very similar to the writing on Seaman's photographs in more than 55 out of about 65 images. A further nine had some small

differences between the handwriting styles, so a definite match could not be concluded in these cases.

Dr Turner said: "This work we have done seems to suggest that many of the photographs had the same handwriting on them as the known Alfred Seaman images. This along with stylistic similarities between the two groups of photos has now made it possible to confidently claim that the majority of this outstanding pictorial record of Victorian life was taken by Seaman."

Dr Bradley said: "I had always suspected that the 'unknown' pictures might have been taken by local Derbyshire photographer Alfred Seaman. He was a prolific Victorian photographer and we have many very similar looking stereophotos of Matlock and Chatsworth which we know were taken by him.

"The problem was that with no photographer's name on the other photographs, attribution was very difficult. All we had to go on was the handwritten title on these images."

Dr Bradley explained that a successful photographer such as Seaman would not have labelled all the images by himself, but would have had a small team of assistants working in his studio, who would have helped in writing the titles on the cards. This made Dr Turner's task even more challenging as he had to compare handwriting from a number of different people.

The pair have been in close contact with the Seaman family who were also able to provide other clues to help on the case.

The international journal 'Stereo World', based in the USA, will be publishing a report of this research. Dr Turner and Dr Bradley will be contenders for the annual award of the National Stereoscopic

Association for historical research into stereoviews. Dr Bradley won this international prize himself in 2005 and the following year it was won by the rock musician Brian May of Queen who is also a stereoview collector.

Dr Turner has considerable expertise in this area of forensic studies. Studies undertaken at the University of Derby in the recent past include analysing Punjabi handwriting styles through different generations, and analysing the potential differences between traditional signatures signed with a ballpoint pen and a digital signature, as found on a driving licence or other document.

You can see more of Alfred Seaman's photographs by visiting Dr Bradley's website at www.freewebs.com/jb3d/

Provided by University of Derby

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