



Showman obscura

A recent project for Folkestone library helped unearth the history of one character who epitomises the down-to-earth side of our seaside history. ROB ILLINGWORTH tells us more about the man whose life story helped recreate a view of our past...

IN ITS heyday, Folkestone had a reputation as being a destination of choice for the holiday-ing well-to-do.

Much has been made of the history of the West End of town, the hotels on The Leas and all those who have passed through their halls.

But there is another story in the history of town, which is epitomised by former showman Edward Longford Davies.

Perhaps an archetypal hero of 'Down Below' where the Leas lift conveyed fun seekers in their hundreds, Davies was a self-styled professor, in the habit of the era's Punch and Judy men, magicians, daredevils and sideshow operators, who arrived in Folkestone in 1886.

The educated guess is that Davies was attracted to the town by the Art Treasures Exhibition held in what was to become the Pleasure Gardens Theatre (Folkestone's own Alexandra Palace) and the air of excitement surrounding it.

Eshewing the like of the *Folkestone Herald* (perhaps too serious a paper for his needs) Davies took out a number of adverts in Holbein's Visitors List and Court Directory offering his services as a ventriloquist and magic lantern man.

"This is an advertisement, pure and simple," one read. "We shall get nothing for it, save a 'Thank you' (for the Professor is exceedingly courteous). If you have little ones and are giving a children's party you cannot do better than engage 'Professor' Davies to amuse the young folk with his ventriloquial cleverness and his magic lantern, and other deep and amusing mysteries."

A showman through and through, Davies had been struck by a childhood visit to Birkenhead where he had seen a camera obscura (as he reveals in a letter to the *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal* and *Photographic Enlarger* in 1890) and decided to set up a public attraction of this sort on Folkestone beach.

An enticement in Holbein's is printed to bring in the punters: "Step into the Camera Obscura and survey mankind from China to Peru, or parts adjacent. You have no idea what a pretty picture it makes. Of course you have seen the cameras at the Crystal Palace, at Margate, and elsewhere, but then they are not Folkestone!"

Davies's advertisement obviously worked and the camera obscura became a feature of the seafront popular with old and young alike as with many optical and image related diversifications of the time.

From 1886 onwards Davies' entries in Holbein's read like episodes of a soap opera.

Public performances were well received by audiences and his affinity with the people of the town was revealed by his decision to hold benefits for the local fishing community hit by hard times.

Holbein's reports that August bank holiday 1889 brings a period of prosperity for the showman, but the tables were soon to turn.

Ill-health, bad weather and a lack of tourist trade take their toll and the next item to appear in Holbein's is of a slightly more sombre tone.

It reads: "We are sorry to learn that Professor Davies, the Ventriloquist (who has delighted so many hundreds of youngsters and 'children of a larger growth') is now confined to his bed - and is not likely

"...you cannot do better than engage 'Professor' Davies to amuse the young folk with his ventriloquial cleverness and magic lantern..."

to resume active operations for some time. The Professor is not richly endowed with this world's goods and he would be very grateful to any good people who would engage the services of his son for Magic Lantern and Ventriloquial Entertainments. The charges are very low and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have done a good turn to a worthy man, who has been struggling for a long time against 'hard luck'."

The sad plea for business had come full circle from the days when Davies himself organised charity benefits, yet despite whatever good feeling there was towards him in the town, when the 'Professor' dies in 1892 there appears to be no obituary for him in any local paper, just one final advert in Holbein's offering his showman's equipment for sale at a reasonable price.

● The story of Edward Longford Davies was the inspiration behind Navigating History project Folkestone Obscura.

Folkestone Obscura is a film surveying 100 years of visual entertainment on the town's seafront made by Stephen Connelly.

The film will be shown in Folkestone library and museum until November 27.

For more details of this and associated events see page 4