

Navigating History: *Seeing By The Sea*

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Introducing the resources in Folkestone Library & Museum to the artists was an important phase of the Navigating History Project. I led extensive building tours during which the artists had a chance to delve through drawers, press buttons, open cabinets, sift through boxes and ask many questions. In response, I tried to develop their interests with further presentations of material. By the end of their visits, the artists would be sitting at the study tables immersed in files and artefacts, alive to the creative possibilities of local history collections.

One request from Stephen Connolly, the filmmaker, did not result in quite such a flood of files. Stephen has an interest in early cinema and optical devices and had read that Folkestone once offered a camera obscura as a tourist attraction. We could locate numerous photographs showing camera obscuras in the background of images of West beach. However, there was scant documentary evidence to furnish the history of these attractions. If Folkestone's first camera obscura was to be a focal point in Navigating History we would have to do some more research.

Martin Easdown's excellent book *Victoria's Golden Pier* gave us an idea of the timespan when camera obscuras had featured on the beach. Eamonn Rooney had spotted a reference to 'Mr Davies' the owner of the first camera obscura in an 1887 article from the *Folkestone Chronicle*. I scanned copies of the *Folkestone Chronicle* and *Folkestone Herald* for the

1880s & '90s but failed to find additional details. We have long runs of these local newspapers in the collection (bound copies of early issues of the *Folkestone Chronicle* were donated back in 1888 when the library opened at Grace Hill). Yet we also hold copies of a different newspaper which I had seldom used in research. *Holbein's Visitors List & Court Directory* was printed by Ambrose Hans Holbein from premises at 17 George Lane. On reading, it is evident that the *List* had a different editorial policy than the 'mainstream' Folkestone newspapers. There was a preoccupation with entertainment, gentle satire and plenty of coverage of the hurly burly of a seaside town. The *List* introduced us to the colourful sub-culture of 'the Professors'. These were entertainers who might play trombone underwater, parachute from balloons or cycle off the end of Victoria pier to dazzle the pennies from the tourists.

Professor Edward Longford Davies was more than just the owner of the camera obscura. He was a ventriloquist, magic lanterneer, charity fundraiser and shameless self-publicist. The *List* printed his adverts when times were good and also appeals for help when his talents were falling. The adverts gave us his home address in Folkestone. This was the clue we needed to investigate other sources in the Local Studies collection.

Using street directories we established the period that Edward Davies lived in Folkestone. Census material gave us details about his family and their

occupations. With the help of our Community Service Volunteer, Larry Liddiard, we were even able to find a gravestone for Edward Davies and his wife Mary Ann over at the Folkestone Town Cemetery in Cheriton.

Stephen's film will draw on material from a wide span of Folkestone's history. Archive and amateur film footage will be incorporated as well as interviews with today's Folkestonians. However, the film will not present a straightforward historical narrative. Forgotten entertainers, unread articles, redundant films might not have been part of our history at all. Stephen meditates on the ways we record, select and omit elements of our history. All the Navigating History artworks embrace such ambitious ideas and I am excited to watch them take shape.

What has especially pleased me about Stephen's approach is that he has been just as willing to participate in the history research as in the artistic process. Remarkably, while scanning an obscure Victorian journal in the British Library, Stephen came across a letter from Edward Longford Davies:

"When a boy, about thirty years ago, I visited the then camera obscura in Birkenhead Park, and after the man attendant had shown us all the views he moved something, and all of a sudden the picture left the table, and there sure enough on the table we saw the three front sides of the building we stood in..."

For the rest of the tale you will have to join us in Navigating History.

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