

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2003

The Adams Family - Photographers

The May meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was a most enjoyable talk by Rosalind Adams on the work of Walton Adams, the locally based photographer, and his sons Marcus and Gilbert, illustrated by some of their original photographic prints.

The family's photographic history spans some 150 years, with father, son and grandson. Walton, the son of a Wesleyan minister, was described as energetic, with white hair, and a relentless gardener. In the 1860s he had helped develop the dry plate process for producing negatives - whereby plates could be prepared before being needed (unlike the previous wet plate process). From a studio in Southampton, he had taken pictures of Queen Victoria, Edward VII and the Belgian royal family, but everything was lost when a fire occurred there. He then moved to Brixton, but his tailoring business did not do well, so he moved to Reading, opening studios in Blagrove Street in the 1880s. Amongst the portraits he had taken was one of General Gordon of Khartoum. Queen Victoria asked for a copy, sending John Brown for it - but to give a copy of a portrait to someone else was then considered unethical. Walton left a copy of the photograph in the front of the premises - 'disappeared' to the back 'as he was busy' - when he returned, John Brown had left - and so had the photograph. In the late 19th century, Walton took many portraits of children, and adults in Victorian dress - customers including the Simmonds, Palmer and Sutton families - and the latter also used photographs rather than line drawings for their seed catalogues.

Marcus studied art at Reading College, and then in a solicitors office as a lawyer. But, he had a good rapport with children, and set up a special studio - with suitable artificial lighting (rather than the natural light of the Conservatory Studio in Blagrove Street) and a camera that would be unnoticed by his sitters, with a long cable so that he could play with the children and capture their expression when it was just right. His work also included a series for Keyser's book on Norman architecture and portraits of prime ministers and the King. At the start of World War I he found himself in London, and eventually (against his father's wishes) set up in partnership with Bertram Park at 43 Dover Street. Here he designed the studio, lighting, cameras, lenses etc for his new children's studio (his rule was 'not over 16'). The aristocracy, rich, and famous came to Dover Street for their children to be portrayed. Marcus was fastidious about his printing - even persuading Kodak to continue making the Kodura E paper for him to use. Each print would be wrapped in tissue, and supplied in a folder tied with red ribbon. They were not 'likenesses', but 'character studies' - and not always with sweet expressions either!! For over 30 years he also photographed the royal children - starting with monthly images of the present queen as an infant. He made an annual visit to Beales store in Bournemouth to buy toys for his studio - when an assistant asked how many children did he have he replied 'Oh thousands'!

He knew the royal family well - and on one occasion George V summoned him for advice, as the Press were hounding him. Marcus advised the King to have a photo call for half an hour, and then for the Press to leave the King to continue with whatever he was doing. This worked well, and has become the usual practice for such occasions.

Marcus's son, Gilbert, was born in 1906, and lived at Lavender Cottage in Wargrave (Marcus living at Hennerton). He liked to look for the unusual to photograph, and accompanied Bertram Park on many of his theatre calls. Gilbert set up a studio at 22 Market Place in Reading, and in the early years also mainly portrayed children. His work also included aircraft (which fascinated him), ballet and theatre, the yachting Olympics after WW2 and the work of artists such as Hepworth and Moore.

Walton, Marcus and Gilbert knew that everything needed to be perfect - the composition, the lighting, the selection of paper, etc to achieve the effect they wanted. The photographic work of these three illustrate that although the process we call photography is not 'art', it can be used to create something that is, with the ingenuity of the person in control of the process.
