GUIDE 7 USING OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

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Introduction

Many people like looking at old photographs. They form an immediate link between ourselves and the past. Often they can lead to conversations of the 'Do you remember?' kind. Used systematically, old photographs can be much more than a stimulus to nostalgia. They can provide a useful research tool which will produce insights into the life of your local community in the past. This guide offers some tips on how to get the most out of looking at the past.

Some things to bear in mind when looking at old photographs

What you can see on a photograph can be affected by all sorts of factors. These include:

- *Technology*. Early cameras were cumbersome and bulky. Films required long exposure times and needed developing by a complex process in a photographer's studio. Early photographs could not show anything moving quickly so they will be either landscapes or posed photographs. It is not until the 20th century and the widespread use of such cameras as the Box Brownie that taking holiday 'snaps' became a reality for the majority of people.

- *Commercial photography*. The cost of purchasing the equipment and maintaining a dark room would be prohibitive for the majority of people in the 9th and early 20th century. Some photography was carried out by rich amateurs, but much more was done for commercial purposes: - illustrating newspaper articles, creating images for adverts or composing views to be used as postcards. In all these cases the motives of the photographer need to be taken into account. The journalist will wish to please his editor. The advertiser will want to sell his goods. No-one would consider visiting a seaside town that was shown as having sewage on the beach. The reason why the photograph was taken needs to be considered. What you see may not be an entirely truthful representation.

- *The attitude of any people in the photograph*. Early images are posed. In the case of the rich sitter the aim will have been to present his/her best side in the same way as a portrait in oils. Images of the working classes of Victorian and Edwardian society are equally posed. You can be sure that the participants will have wanted the chance to 'spruce themselves up' a little before the shot was taken, and were probably only willing to do so for some sort of a bribe. Even now many people are reluctant to have their photographs taken without having a chance to prepare. We want others to see us as we see ourselves.

Some things to look for

There are a few things to consider first:

- What is the date of the photograph?

- Where was it taken?

- Who has taken it and why?

- What is the subject of the picture?

- What can you see in the background?

Sometimes the answers to these questions are obvious. If not, there are lots of details in your photographs which might allow you to open up various avenues of research. Some of these might help you establish the date of the photograph, if you don't know it already (it is always worth looking on the back!). Others might throw light on the social conditions at the time, or on the way businesses developed. Some things you may want to think about might be:

- *The way the item that has been photographed has changed.* It can be useful to get a series of images of the same scene at different periods in time. Setting them in date order will help you see how the place has changed over the years, where new buildings have been added and old buildings have been lost. Many large cities had large scale Ordnance Survey maps made during the mid and late Victorian period. Comparison with these might help establish a date for the scene in the photograph.

- *Businesses.* Are the businesses on the photograph the same as the ones which are there now? If so, would it be possible to collect oral reminiscences from the older members of staff? If not, it might be possible to trace when an establishment was in business through a trade directory. Several of these are now available through Historical Directories On Line, a site hosted by the University of Leicester. The archives of larger companies may be kept by local Archives Offices who will have copies of the historic OS maps. For contact details for West Yorkshire click here

- *Transport.* As noted above early photographic material would not register fast moving objects, but later images can show a wide range of methods of transport: anything from horse-drawn vehicles to high speed trains. The study of transport history is now a popular hobby and most bookshops have a range of publications dealing with local buses, trams and trains. Looking at the technology in the photograph helps date the scene. Some local museums, such as the Tolson at Huddersfield, have transport galleries which are worth a visit.

- *Advertising.* Older photographs often show shops with objects rather than signs to advertise the business undertaken on the premises. These were perhaps more of a necessity in days when literacy levels were lower than they are today, but barber's poles and pawnbrokers signs are still occasionally seen. Advertising placards become more common from the late 800s. As manufacturers often change their logos or strap lines, these can sometimes be dated with reasonable accuracy. Company artwork can also be distinctive.

- *Street furniture.* There are many other everyday objects which have changed, or even disappeared entirely over the course of time. Look for such items as police boxes, telephone kiosks, and streetlights to give you a clue to the age of your photograph. Municipal records, for instance, will give you the date at which gas street lighting was first installed in your community.

- *Clothing.* It is obvious to us all that fashions in clothing clearly change with time. For example, photographs showing men wearing bowler hats and 'toppers' are unlikely to show a modern scene. Looking at the clothing and hairstyles of people in the photographs is one of the easiest ways to approximate a date. Clothes can also represent social divides. Flat caps were more common among the working classes. Many local museums

have collections of period costume which may help you determine dates or manufacture of clothing in your photographs. A valuable web resource is provided by:

The Gallery of Costume
This is the online catalogue for Manchester museum's costume gallery at Platt Hall. There are detailed descriptions of the collection with some illustrations.

Copies of old photographs

There are many places where you can obtain copies of old photographs if not the originals themselves. Here are a few suggestions:

- *On the internet.* There are many sites on the internet which deal with old photographs. Some of these are from professional photographic companies advertising their products. Others are hosted by local authorities or community groups who wish to promote the heritage of their region. Two of the most useful for West Yorkshire are:

  Leodis
  This photographic archive is hosted by Leeds Library and Information Services. It contains images, not only of Leeds itself, but also of all the townships that go to make up the Leeds Metropolitan District

  Twixt Aire and Calder
  Covers the Wakefield Metropolitan District. This site is hosted by Wakefield Libraries and Information Services.

- *Bookshops.* With the growing interest in local history, most of the larger communities in West Yorkshire now have at least one commercially printed volume of old photographs available. These make an ideal starting point and can offer a handy reference for material you have gathered from elsewhere.

- *Libraries and Archives.* Local studies libraries and District Archives Offices may also have holdings of old photographs and may be willing to copy them for you

for personal research. Archive officers generally expect you to make an appointment to visit in advance. This will give them time to retrieve the material which you wish to look at. For contact details for West Yorkshire Archive Offices click here.

Finding the original

Of course there is no substitute for the original thing. It is still possible to go to places where you might discover the photograph itself and not just a copy. Here are some suggestions:

- *Postcards.* Collecting old postcards can be an absorbing hobby, and antique fairs and flea markets often have them for sale. Remember that in Victorian and Edwardian times it was possible to get postcards of most localities in the British Isles, not just of seaside towns and other tourist attractions. Prior to the widespread use of the telephone, postcards were used in much the same way that we use e-mails today. There's a possibility you'll find a postcard of the town of village in which you live.

- *Members of the local community.* Once it becomes clear that you are serious about documenting the history of your area through photographs you can appeal for contributions from members of your group or from the wider community. This may in turn lead to the possibility of some oral history work as older people sometimes like to reminisce about what life was like when the photographs were taken. When working with other people's images there are a few things which you will need to think about to make sure that your project runs without a hitch. Here are some of them:

    Define the subject matter of the photographs you wish to receive. Is it the whole village or just a particular building or street? Do you want them from a particular period in time?

Explain what you intend to do with the photographs. Scanning them onto computer offers a method of having working copies while the original can be returned to its owner. This will all take time. Make sure that the lender is aware of this.

Keep a register of the items you have been given. It should show when the loan was made, name and address of the lender, a list of photographs, and where they are being kept. There should also be a column for the date on which the material was returned. A space for additional comments can also be useful.

Make sure that the lender has a receipt for his/her photographs. This could save misunderstandings at a later date.

If you are intending to use the image in a publicly accessible form such as a display, book or web presentation, make sure that the lender is aware of this. Some people may not want their images used in this way. Always acknowledge the source of the images.

Care of old photographs

Old photographs should be handled with care, held only by the edges and kept out of the light and preferably stored in the dark. Like any other artefact, photographs will decay over time. To slow down this process it is best to store the photographs in a stable, acid-free environment to avoid damaging the image. We would recommend that photographs be kept in individual polyester film envelopes which will help to keep them archivally stable. It will also enable you to handle them without contaminating the surface of the print. We would only recommend marking the back of a photographic print with a soft pencil or with archivally stable pens especially made for this purpose (but these are not cheap).

Archivally stable storage items for photographic prints and negatives can be obtained from companies such as *Secol*.

A final thought

Once you have got your collection together, share the results of your work with others. This may save someone from frustratingly having to go over the same ground as you have done already. Displays and books will interest a local community. A web site might reach a wider audience. This needn't be a site of your own. Many local organisations run community pages which invite content from local groups. Using one of these would bring your work to the attention of the wider world and perhaps bring in some recruits to help with your next project.

This guidance document was written by the West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service

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Appendix:

Some of the more important dates in the development of photography

1826 Nicéphore Niépce produces the first photograph. The process was very slow. It required an eight hour exposure time

1834 Henry Fox Talbot creates negative images on paper by using silver chloride. Positive images were made by pressing this onto a second sheet of paper. These are known as contact prints

1837 Louis Daguerre invents a process using silver iodide on sheets of copper, plated with silver

1839 John Hershel makes the first glass negative

1851 The collodion process is invented by Frank Scott Archer. This produces images on glass plates and is cheaper than either of the processes invented by Daguerre or Fox Talbot

1861 James Clark-Maxwell exhibits the first system for making colour images

1864 First portrait using magnesium was taken by Alfred Brothers

1877 Edward Maybridge uses timesequence photography to look at the way that animals move

1887 The introduction of celluloid film

1888 The first Kodak camera was produced

1889 First Kodak camera to use film rather than paper on a roll

1890 First photograph appears in a newspaper in Holland

1900 First Kodak Box Brownie introduced

1903 Daily Mirror is first daily newspaper to be illustrated mainly with photographs

1907 The Lumière brothers market the first commercial colour film (autochrome)

1925 The Leica I was launched in Leipzig although the prototype was made in 1923

1934 Fuji founded as a maker of photographic film. Within a few years they are also making cameras and lenses

1935 Kodachrome first produced. This was the first commercially available 35mm colour film

1948 Invention of the Polaroid by Edwin H. Lund. This was the first camera to produced instant black and white images

1963 First colour Polaroid film and the introduction of the Kodak Instamatic

1980s The first electronic cameras are developed

1986 Scientists from Kodak invent the first megapixel sensor

1990 Adobe Photoshop launched

1997 Phillipe Kahn demonstrated the first camera phone

2000 First commercially available camera phone, Sharp J-SH04, goes on sale in Japan