

LETTER [1]      VICTORIAN PHOTOGRAPHERS

Sir,— Mr. A. T. Gill in his “One Hundred years ago” article in the April 1969 issue of *The Journal* thinks it would be fascinating to dwell on the unknown figures represented now only by their names recorded in the Photographic Society membership list for 1869. Indeed yes; and in the case of one of the names quoted by Mr. Gill we can: and also bring to life a fascinating picture of the romping of such Victorian photographic society worthies as James Glaisher and J. B. Reade.

Thomas Sopwith (1803–1879; *Dict. Nat. Biography* 1898) kept a diary which was published after his death (edited by B. W. Richardson, 1891) and contains several items about photography. On 16 March 1837 [“1837” sic! – a mistake for 1839, corrected on p. 536] Sopwith went to one of Charles Babbage’s famous soirées and met “Mr. Talbot., the inventor of a kind of photogenic drawing in which the object appears white and the rest of the surface of the paper is very dark — some very admirable examples of which were lying on a chiffonier and attracted great attention: the finest films of vegetable form, and the minutest threads of the finest lacework, are shown with surprising delicacy and clearness.”

In 1856 Sopwith was invited to form one of a company of scientific visitors at Hartwell House near Aylesbury. Richardson, the editor of the Diary, who was also there, remarks, “Photography was just then coming into use, and one of our party, the Rev. J. B. Reade, was amongst the first, if not the first, to lead the way to that great improvement. In the mornings we photographed everybody and everything. I have a capital photo still of Messrs. Glaisher and Sopwith sitting together examining a watch. Sometimes our fun was more lively. One day Mr. Glaisher and I had a wrestling march on the top of a hill, and rolled from the top to the bottom, much to the general amusement”. Sopwith records — “17th September 1856. After ... breakfast, we adjoined to the front of the house, and were for some time employed in witnessing the photographic operations of the Rev. Lowdnes and the Rev. J. B. Reade, who arranged our party in a group and took a photographic picture of the same...” One afternoon Richardson and Sopwith took a walk to the Vicarage at Stone ... to see the Rev. J. B. Reade, a most able man of Science... We found the Vicar busy at work on a new equatorial telescope of large size, which he had himself constructed. We were admitted into his laboratory and were shown the new work he had accomplished in the art of photography, in the development of which he had taken a leading part.”

Nothing is recorded in the edited diary of Thomas Sopwith’s own photographic exploits.

*Mr. Arthur T. Gill comments:*

I had hoped my name-dropping exercise from the Members' list of 1869 might encourage someone to follow up a few leads and am very pleased that Mr. R. Derek Wood has done so with Thomas Sopwith.

The date Sopwith quotes for meeting "Mr. Talbot, the inventor of a kind of photogenic drawing" and for seeing his examples, is of interest. It has not previously been recorded that Fox Talbot showed any examples of his work publicly before 25 January 1839 at the Royal Institution. Sopwith's 16 March 1837 [sic] deserves further scrutiny. Babbage was at that time, I believe, Secretary of The Royal Society, and it is likely that the *soirée* referred to was one held by that body. If it is possible to find a reference to the President, this may solve the problem. In 1837 the Duke of Sussex held that office; by 1839 the Marquess of Northampton was President.

I do not agree with B. W. Richardson that in 1856 "Photography was just then coming into use." Photography was then a very vigorous seventeen years old; but then, I suppose this is the perennial argument as to how young is a teenager.

To read of James Glaisher rolling in the grass is indeed a surprise after his so serious and rather pompous pronouncements to the Photographic Society. I for one am grateful to Mr. Wood for showing us that the great Glaisher was human after all. A.T.G.

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#### LETTER [2] VICTORIAN PHOTOGRAPHERS

Sir,— My letter "Victorian Photographers" which appeared in the July issue of *The Journal* with Mr. A. T. Gill's comments appended requires correction. The date on which Thomas Sopwith saw Talbot's photogenic drawings at Charles Babbage's *soirée* was 1839 and *not* 1837 as printed. I was most surprised to see this incorrect 1837 date on receiving my July *Journal*, which was due to my typing mistake. It is also a very ironic error, as I am at present engaged on research on the Reverend J. B. Reade's part in the early history of photography and in particular the question of whether he started his photographic work in 1839 or in the year 1837. I would therefore ask your readers please to correct the date on p. 412 in your July *Journal* to read 1839. This exhibition of his photogenic drawings at the *soirée* is, of course, not the first display by Talbot but simply a hitherto unrecorded example of how widely the photographs were seen in the early months of 1839.

As to Mr. Gill's comments: he is aware, of course, that photogenic drawings were displayed at a *soirée* held by the Marquis of Northampton, the President of The Royal Society, in 1839; but there are certainly no grounds for his suggestion that Charles Babbage's *soirée* was also connected in any way with The Royal Society. Babbage was *not* secretary of that Society; indeed at that time he was one of its most prominent opponents. R. DEREK WOOD