

Rose-tinted Images: The Photographic Archives of the City of Adelaide

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The Adelaide City Council began systematically collecting and keeping historic photographs of the City of Adelaide during the 1920s and now has a considerable collection of views which are stored in its own purpose-built in-house Archives. This paper looks at the major photographic accessions which the Archives holds and discusses their creation and contents within the context of the Council's ongoing concern with promoting and preserving a visual record of the city's past and progress. The author concludes by suggesting that while these collections are undoubtedly an important archival resource, overall they present a rather partial vision of the city's history, one which focuses very much on what were considered by their creator to be appropriate images of the civic landscape suitable for inclusion in such a formal collection. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the South Australian State History Conference held at the University of Adelaide's Waite Campus in May 2000.

This paper is a consequence of the Adelaide City Council's often overlooked involvement in preserving and promoting South Australian history. This really began in earnest in the 1920s and has continued, intermittently but consistently, to the present day, culminating in the mid-1980s in the establishment of a purpose-built City Archives in the centre of Adelaide close to the Town Hall.¹

It was within this context of a developing historical consciousness that the Council's extensive photographic collections were created. There were two broad categories of photographs – those which were taken to record contemporary events or activities which involved the Council, and those which were collected by the Council, mainly of a historical nature, for the purpose of illustrating and recording the city's progress.

All these photographs are now in the custody of the City Council's Archives in Topham Mall, where public access may be obtained. There are in effect three major photographic collections, comprising over 10 000 items, covering the period from the early 1860s to the late 1970s. These are known as:

- the Corporation's Glass Lantern Slide Collections;
- the Historical Pictorial and Packets Collections (of the former Commercial Department); and
- the Album Collections (of the former Town Clerk's and City Engineer's Departments).

This paper looks at the origins and development of these collections, their contents and their value to researchers as a unique visual record of the city's past from a distinctly municipal standpoint. It concludes by suggesting that these images have a certain intrinsic selectivity and exclusivity about them which ultimately reflects the values and perceptions of their creator.

The Lantern Slide Collections

The creation of a glass lantern slides collection coincided with a period of growing interest among members of the Adelaide City Council in the history of their city. This seems to have started to develop around the early 1920s. As a result the Council began to give special attention to the collecting of memorabilia and mementos relating to the foundation and early history of the city, including personal belongings of Queen Adelaide and Colonel Light (even a lock of the Colonel's hair was accessioned), much of it acquired through the efforts of the Agent-General for South Australia in London, Sir Edward Lucas.² The formal establishment of a loosely termed 'Municipal Museum' followed, promoted strongly by Dr Edward Angas Johnson, a Councillor (who later became the city's Medical Officer of Health 1924–38) and himself a generous donor of historical gifts to the collection. Some of these museum items were exhibited in the Council Chamber and various rooms within the Town Hall, others were kept in a strongroom in the basement.

It was around this same time that the interest in preparing historic lantern slides began. The instigator of this project was the then Deputy Town Clerk,



Well-ordered City. Street traffic in the heart of the CBD, late 1920s.

Item 672, Lantern Slide Collection.

Alec Morison. A reclusive life-long bachelor and naturalist, with a strong personal interest in history and amateur photography, Morison had joined the Corporation in 1895 as a cadet in the Town Clerk's Department, working his way rapidly up what in those days was a highly regimented clerical hierarchy to become Deputy Town Clerk in 1915 and later Town Clerk in 1937. It was Morison who in 1921 suggested that slides be made of old photographs and prints which had been given to the Council, along with a selection of historic photos to be borrowed from the South Australian Public Library, 'as a way of recording the City's progress and heritage since its earliest days'.³

Morison continued to be the mainspring of this project, spending his Saturday afternoons at the Library on North Terrace carefully choosing old photos to be copied for the Council's collection. In this he had the support of the Town Clerk, Horace Beaver and successive Lord Mayors and Councillors, especially Alderman JS Rees (whose own personal collection of historic photos is deposited in the Mortlock Library of South Australiana). Many photos were copied from the South Australian Archives collection, as well as the Government Tourist Bureau, while some were obtained through the office of the Agent-General in London. Quite a few were also sourced from Adelaide photographers Colin Ballantyne, Darian Smith and Harringtons Limited (who occupied space in Eagle Chambers, next door to the Town Hall).

Early in 1924 a subcommittee of Council was formed to consider arranging a series of lantern slide lectures on the subject of 'Early Adelaide'.⁴ However (owing to a royal visit) it was not until the end of 1927 that a private screening of the by now quite substantial collection of slides was given to the Councillors in the Council Chamber. The first public screenings were held in the Town Hall upstairs Banqueting Room during 1928, with the first evening being reserved for old colonists who had arrived before 1870, the slides on this occasion being shown in the ground floor Council Chamber 'so as to save the old people having to walk up the stairs'.⁵ Several more screenings were held during 1928; one on the 3 August was attended by over 400 people despite it being a cold wet winter's night.

By now the collection had grown to more than 600 slides, having been supplemented by some made available by Sir Langdon Bonython from his private collection.⁶ Many other citizens came forward offering to donate or loan photos to the Council for copying. The Council, for its part, continued to make money available for the purchase of more slides (each one cost 2/2d to produce, the work being done by Kodak in Rundle Street).

Considerable interest seems to have been shown in these presentations, and tickets for them issued at the Town Clerk's Office soon sold out. Patrons were



Street scene, 1880s. Photos from the colonial period made up much of the Lantern Slide Collection. This one shows signs of deterioration. *Item 173, Morison Collection.*

treated to over an hour lecture by the Deputy Town Clerk on Adelaide's early history illustrated with a selection of about 250 slides. There were views of early Adelaide streets and buildings, founding colonists, Queen Adelaide and King William, Colonel Light and his contemporaries and other scenes mainly connected with the colonial period.

By 1929 Morison had managed to put together a second series of slides which featured some interesting 'then and now' views of well-known buildings and landmarks, intended to show the progress of the city, together with a fine set of 'magnificent' panoramic views taken from an aeroplane. Soon approaches were being made to the Council by various community groups and social clubs for presentations: the Returned Services League, the Institutes Association, several church groups, the Justices Association and others were shown the slides; in addition arrangements were made with the Director of Education for senior children attending the city schools to witness a screening in the Town Hall.⁷

In the years between 1929 and 1936 more slides were added to this unique collection and Morison continued his lectures to various groups of citizens. As part of the State centenary celebrations a special exhibition of slides took place on 3 December 1936; this was the last recorded public showing of the slides (Morison became Town Clerk in 1937 and possibly did not have time to devote to the presentations). By now the collection totalled over 1000 slides, each one numbered, catalogued and stored in purpose-made wooden boxes.

The Corporation's glass lantern slides collection is still held in the City Archives where it has been supplemented by several hundred slides from Morison's own extensive personal collection, given to the Council after he retired as Town Clerk in 1946 due to ill health. These slides are referred to as the Morison Collection and, like the official Corporation collection, contain slides on many historical subjects as well as some depicting Morison's personal travels into Asia and Australia in the 1920s and 30s. In addition to these there are a very small number of slides which his successor, WCD Veale used to illustrate lectures during the time he was City Engineer (1929-47).

Thus the entire collection of glass lantern slides amounts to almost 2000 items. While the glass slides themselves have mostly survived intact, unfortunately the same cannot be said for the majority of the images they portray, which have mostly deteriorated and are now in quite poor condition (the emulsion seems to be peeling away from the surface, similar to paint peeling off). A small number of them have been printed by the Archives and placed in binders for researchers to look at but their quality is patchy and they are not really particularly useful for reproduction purposes, although a few have been successfully copied.

Interestingly, the original glass lantern slide projector, or Terpuoscope, still exists and has been modernised by the removal of the gas fittings and their replacement with an electric fan and globe. The early 12-foot square screen and its accompanying black border also exist and are kept in the Archives. So technically all the ingredients are there to recreate the lantern lecture slide shows of the 1920s and 30s and maybe one day this will be attempted, although the quality of the images would be vastly inferior.

The Historical Pictorial and Packets Collections

The second major group of photos held by the City Archives are those created by the Council's former Commercial Department. These fall into two major categories: what we call the Historical Pictorial Collection, consisting of about 1800 items, and the so-called 'Packets' Collection which contains approximately 3000 to 4000 photos.

The Commercial Department existed from 1976 to 1982, its main function being to manage the City Council's commercial and property interests and this included, somewhat strangely, responsibility for the Corporation's museum collection. This collection – the present day equivalent of which we now call the City of Adelaide Civic Collection – was a wide assortment of historic



Garden City. Looking north across a neatly manicured Victoria Square towards the Town Hall, 1880s.

Item 1207, Historical Pictorial Collection.

memorabilia, artefacts, and other ancient curiosities, including the Queen Adelaide and Colonel Light relics, accumulated by successive Councils since the 1840s and added to substantially during the 1920s, some of which was (and still is) used to decorate the corridors and meeting rooms of the Town Hall.⁸ Many of these museum items had been presented to the city by wealthy local benefactors, others had been given to former Mayors by visiting dignitaries or royalty, and some had been purchased by the Council due to their historical or sentimental value to the city.

Once again the Council was, in the mid-1970s, remarkably well switched on to looking after local history. Under the auspices of Russell Arland, who had succeeded Veale as Town Clerk in 1965, a number of civic history initiatives were taken including support for the writing of a popular history of Adelaide (published by Derek Whitelock in 1977), the instigation of an ambitious oral history project and, most importantly, the appointment of an archivist in 1978 to look after the Corporation's vast but chronically disorganised collection of historic paper-based records.⁹

Another thing the Corporation did around this time was to take steps to sort out its considerable collection of historical museum material. A Graduate Research Historian was employed specifically to work under the direction of the Assistant Property Manager (Len Matthews) on a project which involved gathering together, documenting and photographing museum collection items and anything else of a historic nature that could be found lying around the place.¹⁰ This included a widely disparate array of old items left in Corporation offices and outbuildings, mostly in poor or inappropriate storage conditions: old photographs, maps, plans, prints, posters, paintings and historic memorabilia spread throughout the Corporation properties, the Town Hall and the City Engineer's Halifax and Sturt Street Depots.

These items were systematically photographed and the photographs carefully catalogued and indexed, and 35mm negatives and contact prints made which were placed in binders.¹¹ Unfortunately the project never seems to have been completed (there were about 200 items for which no negative or contact print exists) but even so it is a fascinating collection. Important civic events and personalities, major streets and buildings, parks and gardens, city views, historic paintings and sketches of early Adelaide, Corporation plant and property, the River Torrens, statues and fountains, and many other interesting subjects relating to the city and its Council from the period 1860 to the late 1950s make up the bulk of the Historical Pictorial Collection, which is by far the most extensively used collection of photographs held by the City Archives.¹²

The other important collection created by the Commercial Department around this time was what's become known as the 'Packets', or to give its correct archival



History from above. Arrival of the Duke and Duchess of York at the Adelaide Town Hall, July 1901.

Item 543, Historical Pictorial Collection.

series title 'Commercial Department Photographic Collection in Numbered, Named Envelopes'. Essentially this started out as a collection of photos of Corporation properties but was widened to include photos of just about anything else that went on during the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in which the Council could conceivably be said to have an interest. Thus there are envelopes stuffed full of photos of city buildings prior to demolition, photos of street traffic and street widening projects, the Central Market redevelopment, Victoria Square's remodelling, city bridges, Rundle Street and its conversion into a Mall, demolition of the old City Baths, Elder Park, the Torrens Lake, the construction of the Festival Centre, parklands and playgrounds – just to mention a few of the subjects covered. In all there are about 250 packets with each one containing up to a dozen or more separate photographs, some of which are in colour.¹³ Some of these photos were taken by the Corporation staff, though most were acquired from local commercial photographers, especially Donald Gee, who seems to have done most of the Corporation's photographic work around this time; some were also purchased from the *Advertiser* newspaper Photo Sales Department.

The Album Collections

Both the Town Clerk's Department and the City Engineer's Department – the two major wings of the Corporation for well over 100 years – compiled albums in relation to their activities and areas of responsibility. Few of these albums have been looked at by researchers so far, partly I suspect because of their highly specialised subject matter, but also probably because their existence has not been widely known about.¹⁴

In the case of the Town Clerk's Department there are albums of photos from the mid-19th century, including one with portraits of early Mayors, Councillors, and some other prominent colonial officials and colonists. There are albums featuring large format photos commemorating every royal visit to Adelaide from 1901 to 1963 (two albums for the 1954 visit), the 1936 State Jubilee, various park lands development and beautification projects, the City Market remodelling, Municipal Golf Links, and general views of the city during the 1940s and early 50s, as well as albums showing important civic identities and official Council functions in and outside the Town Hall. The photos in these albums provide some fascinating glimpses of civic preoccupations and protocol during this time which were often quite distinct from those of other local councils or other levels of government.

The City Engineer's albums are, as expected, more utilitarian in their contents: scenes of road and bridge works, Corporation plant and machinery, street widening projects and park lands improvements and maintenance make up

the bulk of the collection. There are a couple of albums of rare photos of the construction of the City Bridge in 1929–30, along with a several more devoted to the Morphett Street Bridge construction in 1966–67. Individual albums record various improvement works in the vicinity of the Torrens Lake during the inter-war period. These record details of the installation of sluice gates at the Torrens Weir in 1928 to overcome problems of silt build-up in the Lake, and the landscaping of the Torrens banks in the 1930s, undertaken by the Corporation in an attempt to ease unemployment brought about by the Depression. There are also three very interesting albums of acre views depicting demolition and construction works carried out on buildings in the city on each town acre during the 1950s and 60s.¹⁵ Other volumes deal with street traffic and parking, Victoria Square and Rundle Street reconstruction, preparations for the Adelaide Festival of Arts and royal visits, pageants and pavements, fountains, statuary, public conveniences – virtually anything which involved engineering work was recorded on film. Each photo in these albums is accompanied by a detailed caption showing the subject, location and date. In all there are some 45 albums in this series. Not only do they show the day-to-day workings of the Engineer's Department but they also provide some useful background views of city streetscapes and buildings, often quite ordinary buildings which would otherwise probably not have been photographed.

So what can we say about all these interesting and rather unusual photographic collections as a whole? As I said at the beginning, they present a perception of the city's history which reflects the Council's role as its governing authority. That is to say, they present us with a visual record of the city's past which looks at it from an official civic perspective. However, I would suggest that, fascinating though they are, these collections present a rather skewed perspective of the city's history. Far from being a true representation of the heterogeneity of city life, they appear to focus predominantly on what at the time was seen to be appropriate from a photogenic viewpoint – what I suppose we would today refer to as being 'politically correct' – highly selective images of the city in which those features of the civic landscape considered socially and politically acceptable were over-represented, while the less salubrious side of the city's character was consciously left out of the collection.

This then is a somewhat sanitised photographic record of Adelaide's history which discreetly omitted images of the less agreeable, less wholesome aspects of the urban environment, such as the squalid living conditions of the city's notorious slums, the dreadful impact of the Depression, and the plight of extensive areas of park lands. Instead there is a noticeable preponderance of views of an attractive, affluent, socially advantaged city, of a pristine, privileged, almost paradisaean existence which probably bore little resemblance to the everyday reality of the vast majority of the city's inhabitants.

Some of the photos in these collections, albeit only a very small number of them, were used in Council publications, especially the Council's Annual Reports and the little City of Adelaide Municipal Yearbook, which had first been published in 1911, and continued to be produced every year thereafter until the early 1970s. But the vast majority of the views contained in these collections were not put into any Council publications. Yet the perception presented by these images is still overwhelmingly one of a clean, respectable, picturesque, garden city – almost majestic in its appearance with its stately Victorian buildings, its grand boulevards, its splendid parks and scrupulously maintained public gardens. Indeed the vision portrayed here is one of a decent city, a fortunate city – devoid of any nasty vices or vulgarities – a city on which the sun always shone, a model city proudly presented by the City Fathers for all to see.

So this is really a case where history 'through the lens' is quite distorted. What we have here is a discrete, rather 'rose-tinted' vision of Adelaide's past, a one-sided photographic representation which needs to be offset by some more graphic images of the other side of the tracks to provide a true picture of what Adelaide was really like (as Peter Morton did so well in his recently published history of the city).¹⁶ For the most part the Council's collection is an establishment, almost elitist, view of the city's history emanating from the lofty heights of the Town Hall; it is a selective, indeed an exclusive, photographic record of Adelaide's past.

Nevertheless, despite these biases, this is an important archival resource which clearly reflects the Adelaide City Council's commitment to collecting and recording images of how it viewed the city's development.

Endnotes

1 An archivist was first appointed by the Council in 1978, the records being stored in rather unsatisfactory conditions underneath the Town Hall. The new City Archives, which opened in July 1986, was accommodated within the Council's newly-constructed Topham car park and shopping mall development. The Council's ongoing commitment to historical pursuits has recently been demonstrated by its commissioning of the writing of a history of the city from 1929 to 1979, and support for establishing a proposed joint City Council and State Government Museum of Adelaide.

2 Adelaide City Council Annual Reports, 1921–29.

3 ACC Town Clerk's Special File 131, 'Early Adelaide'.

4 ACC Minutes, 7 April 1924.

5 ACC Town Clerk's Special File 131.

6 Bonython was Lord Mayor of Adelaide during 1927–30. Besides donating historic photos and memorabilia to the Council he also presented the city in 1935 with a clock to be installed

in the Adelaide Town Hall tower where a gaping hole had existed ever since its construction in 1866.

7 ACC Town Clerk's Special File 131.

8 The City of Adelaide Civic Collection consists mainly of gifts and presentations to the city, including all the city's public statues and sculptures. Much of the collection is on display in the Town Hall, the remainder being stored at the City Archives where it is looked after by a part-time curator.

9 The City of Adelaide Oral History Collection consists of 110 interviews with former Lord Mayors, Councillors and Corporation staff, as well as long-term residents and business proprietors within the city. The tapes and transcripts of the interviews are kept in the City Archives.

10 The temporary appointment of a Research Historian was made under a State Unemployment Relief Scheme. Details are in Accession 1304, File A1072/1, 'Commercial Department Reorganisation'.

11 Details of the project are contained in Accession 2795, Unregistered Files re Copying of Photographs and Other Documents.

12 The high use of this collection is explained by the fact that the binders containing the contact prints are on open access in the Archives Search Room, whereas all other photographic accessions are held in the repository and have to be requested via the archivist.

13 The collection was transferred to the Archives in 1981. The majority of these photos have long since been removed from the packets and placed in appropriate polypropylene containers. A detailed listing to their contents can be found in Accession 3554.

14 The publication of Archives Source Sheet No. 38 *Photographs* will hopefully correct this situation by bringing the existence of the albums, and all other photographic accessions, to the attention of users.

15 The Town Acres were one-acre square blocks into which the entire city was divided by Colonel Light in his original plan of Adelaide in 1837. A total of 1040 acres was shown on the plan starting with Town Acre No.1 at the corner of North and West Terraces. The Town Acre numbers have remained constant to this day, unlike the street property numbers which were changed in the 1880s and again in 1920.

16 See Peter Morton, *After Light. A History of the City of Adelaide and its Council 1878-1928*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1996.