

Analysing Victorian Family Photographs

A Checklist of Procedures

by

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There are three principal elements that need to be considered in the analysis of Victorian family photographs:

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| 1 | Physical Appearance | this includes the image and its packaging |
| 2 | The Image Itself | i.e. the information contained within the image and what we can deduce from it |
| 3 | The Occasion | i.e. the reason why the photograph was taken |

The following notes indicate what to look for and what may be deduced from the evidence. They need to be read in conjunction with the reading list which indicates where to go for more detailed information.

1 Physical Appearance

Photographs are artefacts. They come set into jewellery, pasted onto mounts and inserted into cases, frames, envelopes, slips etc. Their packaging and the various processes used in their production can assist with dating, help us to understand their intended purpose, and signal their relative significance to their owner. *The Expert Guide to Dating Victorian Family Photographs* is specifically concerned with dating from physical appearance.

Format

Begin by identifying the photograph's format which will narrow the date to a broad time span. The major formats in the Victorian family album in Britain are as follows:

Daguerreotypes	1841 - c.1855
Wet Collodion Positives	c.1852 - 1890s
Ferrotypes	Invented mid 1850s, mainly produced in Britain 1872 - 1950s
Cartes de Visite	c.1860 - World War One
Cabinets	1866 - World War One
Snapshots	1888 -
Postcards	From c.1902 in commercial portraiture

As some formats were more expensive than others, the choice of format can reflect a customer's financial situation or suggest that the photograph held a special significance for its owner.

Card Formats

As the card formats, such as the carte de visite and cabinet, were in circulation for over fifty years, stylistic changes were introduced to retain customer interest. These stylistic changes help with dating. The cardboard mounts also carried advertising. Careful examination of all the following features can help establish an approximate date. It may also reveal the 'class' of studio which, in turn, can suggest the sitter's social status.

Cardboard Mounts

The style of mount can indicate if the photograph was intended for the album, for wall hanging in the home or display in public exhibition. The physical appearance of the cardboard mount changed over time. When analysing cartes and cabinets note particularly the thickness, colour, texture and shape of the card. The thinner

the cardboard mount, the earlier it is. Dark colours such as bottle green, maroon etc. appear from the 1880s. Check to see if the corners are square or round, and if the edges are bevelled.

Decorative Designs

Some studios devised their own distinctive designs on the verso of the cardboard mount. Most used the standard designs supplied by the manufacturers. All changed over time. Most distinctive and readily datable are the Japanese influenced designs of the 1880s and 1890s.

Advertising

Studio addresses permit searches of town trade directories to establish approximate dates of occupation. The RPS Historical Group has published listings of studios from 1841 to 1910 for certain towns, cities and counties. Some listings can also be found on the web.

Advertisements of products and services can help with dating. Studios advertising licences to work particular styles of photograph were likely to pass the costs of the licences onto their customers, and therefore represent the more exclusive end of the market. References to 'instantaneous process' usually refer to the introduction of the faster gelatine dry plate negatives which were marketed commercially from 1879.

Adverts boasting success in exhibitions can help with dating because the year of the award is often included. Successful photographers usually fixed their prices to reflect this public recognition of their superior artistic abilities.

Mount Manufacturers' Advertising

Mount manufacturers usually advertise in tiny print along the bottom of the verso. From 1883 manufacturers could register ownership of the designs, and references to the registration number are sometimes given in tiny print.

Processes

Process identification can be difficult and is best left to specialists. However, some processes such as opal, carbon and platinum are easier to identify. They also cost more than the standard silver processes.

Colour photography in the nineteenth century mostly meant colour applied to the surface of a monochrome photograph. This represented an additional cost and suggests a photograph of special significance to its owner.

Manuscript Information

Manuscript information on photographs is the exception rather than the rule. It normally comes from two sources, the studio or the owner. Studios frequently wrote the negative reference number on the verso, which was often sequential. If the family collection contains a number of photographs from the same studio, the negative reference numbers can provide a relative, sequential dating.

In the case of owner's notes, try to assess if the handwriting is contemporary or later, since details noted at the time are *likely* to be more reliable. Remember that photographs were frequently exchanged between friends and a date may refer to the year of the gift, rather than the date of the actual sitting.

2 The Image

Nineteenth century portrait photographers shared a set of beliefs about the nature and purpose of their work and adopted a range of working practices that gave expression to these ideas. They observed the fundamental imperative of idealising the sitter and every element of the portrait conformed to this tenet. Ideology and methodology worked together to shape the generic or typical image. Armed with the knowledge of what is normal, conventional and expected, we can then begin to identify the unusual or unexpected in a photograph. By pinpointing deviations from the norm, we may learn more about the sitter. Take careful note of the following elements:

Expression

Expression conveys different meanings in society at different times and underlines the importance of interpreting photographs in context. In commercial portrait photography expression is usually determined by conventions, grave for the Victorians, grinning for us today. Look to see if the sitter is breaking the rules. If so, what does it tell us about the sitter?

Body Language

In the respectable Victorian photographic studio, pose was prescribed, formal and conventional, with males allowed greater variety of position than females. Note any exceptions and look for explanations. In later snapshots people are generally more relaxed and less inhibited. Always look to see who is touching whom, and how they are touching. What does this reveal about their relationship?

Lighting

Daylight was the major source of lighting in the nineteenth century. It was deployed to highlight a sitter's good points and shadow perceived physical defects or abnormalities. In art photography bold lighting effects were used to assist characterisation. In commercial portraiture the intention was to portray sitters as 'moderately calm ladies and gentlemen'.

Backgrounds

Painted studio backdrops depicting elegantly furnished interiors or gracious rustic landscapes were designed to confer anonymity but suggest prosperity and success. Outdoor settings, which may portray sitters in their customary surroundings, can reveal information about social status, home, work or leisure pursuits.

Accessories

You need to try to distinguish between conventional studio props such as books, plants, flowers, toys etc., and the prized personal possessions which sitters brought with them to the studio because they held a special significance. Portraits of absent loved-ones, certificates, trophies, medals, badges or items related to work often explain why the portrait was taken.

Dress

Costume can help identify a sitter's social class, occupation or the occasion being celebrated. This can include rites of passage, achievement that reflects credit on the family and prestigious social occasions such as balls, amateur dramatics etc. Dress can also assist with dating, particularly in the case of younger women who followed fashion trends.

3 The Occasion

Victorian family photographs commemorate only those events that reflected credit on the sitter and their family. These included rites of passage, special occasions such as holidays and outings, celebrations of success and achievement and photographs of those prized possessions which affirmed or enhanced the family's social status.

Knowledge of the occasion can be of particular assistance to family historians who can draw on their genealogical researches to assign a firm date, or, in some cases, confirm a possible identification.

Rites of Passage

The dutiful observance of the various rites of passage conferred acceptance in Victorian society and helped to establish and advance social status. The photographs taken to commemorate such rites therefore advertised a family's conformity, probity and respectability.

Christenings

Usually identified by baby's dress. Note that in affluent families the nurse (not always in uniform) could be photographed holding the infant.

Baby Dress, Shortening Dress, Skirts

Victorian babies could be put into shortening dress within months of their birth. Infant boys and girls both wore skirts. These changes of dress can help assess the age of a child.

Breeching

Baby boys wore skirts and normally acquired their first pair of short trousers between the ages of 3 to 5 years. This was a very popular occasion for a photograph. The tradition of skirts and breeching died out in working class families in the 1920s. Breeching portraits can show the little boy on his own, with his siblings or with parent(s).

Birthdays

In more affluent families, children were taken to the photographic studio once a year around the time of their birthday, to document growth and development.

Confirmation

A meaningful occasion for the Victorian 'teenager'. Girls selected their dress with some care.

Adulthood

To mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, girls (around the age of 16) put up their hair and let down their skirts. Loose hair and bare legs therefore indicate a girl, rather than a young woman.

Some 'teenage' boys visited the photographer on acquiring their first pair of long trousers. In working class families this occurred when the boys left school and got their first job.

The daughters of the affluent and aristocratic were presented at court and photographed in their distinctive 'Coming Out' dress.

Engagement

Engagement portraits may feature the engaged person alone or together with their future partner. They can be difficult to distinguish from wedding photographs. In some engagement portraits the couple do not touch each other at all.

Always make a point of examining the hands of adult females in search of rings. Marriage was regarded as an important achievement for Victorian women and the ring was a symbol of success. Ring fingers are prominently displayed in portraits taken to celebrate engagements, marriages and wedding anniversaries.

Marriage

The conventional wedding portrait features one partner sitting, the other standing to one side with one hand resting lightly on the shoulder of the seated spouse. Only rich Victorian brides wore white. Most women wore the best day dress they could afford. The ring is usually prominently displayed. Fresh flowers and button holes become generally more prevalent in photographs from the 1880s.

However, wedding photographs can also feature the bride and groom in individual portraits, sometimes specially arranged to face each other in the album.

By 1900 couples were beginning to commission small numbers of additional portraits featuring bridesmaids, relatives etc.

Wedding groups were increasingly taken out of doors (in the garden or street) from the 1880s following the introduction of the dry plate negative.

Anniversaries

Silver wedding anniversary photographs are not uncommon. They can feature the couple in individual portraits, together in one photograph, or as part of a family group with their children (though not usually including their sons- and daughters-in-law).

Death

Photographs taken when the deceased was alive were frequently copied and circulated to friends. Framed enlargements from a favourite photograph were regularly commissioned to hang on the parlour wall.

Post-mortem portraiture was practised but not widespread in Britain.

Women were regularly photographed in mourning dress which followed contemporary fashion and conferred prestige.

Special Occasions

The routines of everyday life were rarely photographed in the nineteenth century. Instead, photographs were taken to commemorate special events which broke the monotony of daily routine and conferred prestige on the family.

Holidays

Holidaymakers regularly had their portraits taken either in conventional studios at the resort or by itinerant photographers who supplied 'while-you-wait' portraits on the sands, in the fairground or in other venues which drew the crowds at holiday time. Similarly, excursions to stay with distant relatives were frequently commemorated by a visit to the photographer's studio.

Soirees and Balls

Sitters would change into evening dress or fancy dress at the studio. The first electric light studio in Britain (opened in 1877) extended opening hours specifically to cater for those attending social events in the evening.

Amateur Theatricals

Here again, sitters would normally change into costume at the studio.

Success and Achievement

Career advancement was often identified by dress or uniform. Promotion and achievement was commemorated by portraits of graduates in gowns and mortar boards, policemen in uniform displaying a new stripe or badge, and freemasons and officials in their robes and chains of office.

Successful sportsmen and women frequently took cups, medals, prizes and certificates to the studio where they would change into their sporting kit.

Prized Possessions

Individuals frequently took the family pet, dogs and cats, to be photographed in the studio. Sitters were regularly pictured in and out of the studio with possessions that conferred status and prestige, such as the horse and carriage or the new bicycle.

Further Reading

General

- Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits* (London & New York: Tauris Parke Books, 1993).
- , 'Taken From Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain, 1860 – 1910', *History of Photography*, Vol. 30 No.4 (Winter 2006), pp.309-47
- , *Picturing the Family*, Open University, OpenLearn Study Unit (A173_1), <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=2688>
- , 'Fair Likeness: Portrait Photography at the Fairground in Nineteenth Century Britain', in Simon Popple and Vanessa Toulmin, eds., *Visual Delights: Essays on the Popular and Projected Image in the Nineteenth Century* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), pp.71-83
- , 'A Roving Scot: Itinerant Photography in the Heart of England in the 1850s', *Scottish Photography Bulletin* (1992), pp.3-15
- , 'The Itinerant Photographer in Britain, 1850-1880', *History of Photography*, Vol. 14 No.1 (Jan-Mar 1990), pp.49-68

Formats and Processes

Brian Coe & Mark Haworth-Booth, *A Guide to Early Photographic Processes* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1983)

John Hannavy, *Case Histories: The Packaging and Presentation of the Photographic Portrait in Victorian Britain 1840-1875* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2005)

Audrey Linkman, 'Cheap Tin Trade: The Ferrotypic Portrait in Victorian Britain', *Photographica World*, 69 (June 1994), pp.17-28

---, 'Flashed, Pot and Porcelain: The Opalotype in Victorian Britain', *Photographica World*, 80 & 81 (March and June 1997)

---, 'Nineteenth Century Card Formats in Britain', *Royal Photographic Society Historical Group Supplement*, 92 (March 1991)

---, 'The Stigma of Instability: The Carbon Process and Commercial Photography in Britain, 1864 – 1880', *Photographica World*, 91 (Winter 1999/2000)

Dress

Curators at your local museum can give advice on costume in photographs or suggest where you can apply for more specialist information.

Dress - General Reading

C.Willett Cunnington & Phillis Cunnington, *Handbook of English Costume in the Nineteenth Century* (3rd edn., London: Faber & Faber, 1970)

Alison Gernsheim, *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey* (New York: Dover Publications, 1981)

Madeleine Ginsburg, *Victorian Dress in Photographs* (London: Batsford, 1982)

Avril Lansdell, *Fashion à la Carte 1860 - 1900: A Study of Fashion through Cartes de Visite* (2nd edn., Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1986)

Jayne Shrimpton, *Family Photographs and How To Date Them* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2008)
Covers the period from 1850s to 1940s and, in spite of its title, is exclusively concerned with dating by dress.

Fashion in Photographs 1860-1940 (B.T. Batsford, in association with the National Portrait Gallery). This series comprised four volumes each of which spanned a period of twenty years:

Miles Lambert, *Fashion in Photographs 1860 – 1880* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1991)

Sarah Levitt, *Fashion in Photographs 1880 – 1900* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1991)

Katrina Rolley & Caroline Aish, *Fashion in Photographs 1900 – 1920* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1992)

Elizabeth Owen, *Fashion in Photographs 1920 – 1940* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1993)

Special Dress

Avril Lansdell, *Occupational Costume and Working Clothes, 1776-1976* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1977)

----, *Wedding Fashions 1860 – 1980* (2nd edn., Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1986)

----, *Seaside Fashions 1860 - 1939: A Study of Clothes worn in or beside the Sea* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1990)

Phillis Cunnington & Catherine Lucas, *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths* (London: A. And C. Black, 1972)

Iain Swinnerton, *Identifying your World War I Soldier from Badges and Photographs* (Federation of Family History Societies, 2001)

Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982)

Dating

Audrey Linkman, *The Expert Guide to Dating Victorian Family Photographs* (Manchester: Greater Manchester County Record Office, 2000)

Robert Pols, *Dating Nineteenth Century Photographs* (Bury: The Alden Press, 2005)

Dating by Photographer

Bernard & Pauline Heathcote, *A Faithful Likeness: The First Photographic Portrait Studios in the British Isles 1841 to 1855*, 2002. Available from Bernard & Pauline Heathcote, 27 Plough Lane, Lowdham, Nottinghamshire, NG14 7AT.

Provides useful biographies of photographers active in the period 1841 to 1855, sourced mainly from contemporary newspapers, together with an alphabetical listing by location giving addresses and dates.

The Royal Photographic Society Historical Group periodically issues Supplements which list, with dates and addresses, all the photographers in a town, city or county whose names appeared in the local trade directories from 1841 to 1910. These lists can be used in conjunction with a photographer's name and address on the backs of card photographs to assign approximate dates. For a list of areas, see:

<http://www.rps.org/group/Historical/PhotoHistorian--Supplements>

The following publications contain similar (and often more detailed) information:

England

Cornwall

Charles Thomas, *Views and likenesses: Early photographers and their work in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly 1839 – 1870* (Truro: Royal Institution of Cornwall, 1988)

Doncaster

Keith I P Adamson, *Photographers in Victorian Doncaster 1842 - 1900* (Doncaster Museum Service, 1998)

Hertfordshire

Bill Smith, *Hertfordshire Photographers 1839 - 1939*. Available from Bill Smith, 344 Grace Way, Stevenage, SG1 5AP

Hampshire

Martin Norgate, *Directory of Hampshire Photographers 1850 – 1969* (Hampshire County Council, Museums Service, 1995)

Isle of Wight

Raymond V Turley, *Isle of Wight Photographers, 1840-1940* (Southampton: University of Southampton Libraries, 2001) ISBN 0 854 32744 4

Lancashire

Gillian Jones, *Lancashire Professional Photographers 1840-1940* (Watford: PhotoResearch, 2004) ISBN 09523011 5

London

Michael Pritchard, *A Directory of London Photographers 1841 – 1908* (rev edn., Watford: PhotoResearch, 1994).

Scarborough

Anne & Paul Bayliss, *Photographers in Mid-Nineteenth Century Scarborough*. Available from A. M. Bayliss, Flat 5, 12 Esplanade, Scarborough, YO11 2AF

Warrington

David Forrest, *Warrington Photographers 1854 - 1992* (Liverpool & S.W. Lancashire FHS, 1993) Available from J.D. Griffiths, 9 Manor Road, Lymm, WA13 OAY

Wiltshire

Martin Norgate et al., *Photographers in Wiltshire 1842 – 1939* (Wiltshire Library & Museum Service, 1985) Wiltshire Monograph No.5.

York

Hugh Murray, *Photographs and Photographers of York: The Early Years 1844 -1879* (Yorkshire Architectural & York Archaeological Society, 1986)

Ireland

Edward Chandler, 'Early Irish Pioneers', *The PhotoHistorian* 92 (Spring 1991), pp.20-28

W.A. Maguire, *A Century in Focus. Photography and Photographers in the North of Ireland 1839-1939* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001) ISBN 0 85640 679 1

A.D. Morrison-Low, 'A Brief Survey of Nineteenth Century Photography in Ireland', in Michael Pritchard, ed., *Technology and Art: The Birth and Early Years of Photography* (Bath: RPS Historical Group, 1990)

Scotland

D. Richard Torrance, *Photographers in Central Scotland to 1914*

----, *Photographers in Edinburgh and the Lothian to 1914*

----, *Photographers in Lanarkshire to 1914*

----, *Photographers in North Eastern Scotland to 1914*

----, *Photographers in Northern Scotland to 1914*

----, *Photographers in Southern Scotland to 1914*

----, *Photographers in Western Scotland to 1914*

Available from the Scottish Genealogy Society, 15 Victoria Terrace, Edinburgh, EH1 2JL

Paisley

Don McCoo, *Paisley Photographers 1850-1900* (Paisley: Foulis Archive Press, 1986)

Web Listings

Bristol

<http://www.cartes.fsnet.co.uk/photo/azlist2.htm>

A listing of Bristol Photographers 1852 – 1972

London

<http://www.photolondon.org.uk/>

A database of nineteenth century photographers and allied trades in London 1841-1901 based on research by David Webb

Sussex

<http://www.photohistory-sussex.co.uk/index.htm>

A listing of photographers active between 1841 and 1910