

Portrait Photography

Viewpoint windows display

The interpretation for this display has been written with members of RAMM's Future Skills Programme which gives individuals of any age the opportunity to gain work experience in the museum and cultural sector.

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Window 1

Daguerreotype portrait of an unknown girl

Charles Henry Williamson

About 1855-1865

This portrait of an unknown young girl is called a daguerreotype. One of the earliest forms of photography, the daguerreotype method imprinted an image on a sheet of copper plate with a thin sheet of silver. The process usually took up to 15 minutes.

The photographer of this daguerreotype was Charles Henry Williamson, an American photographer practising around the middle of the 19th century. At the time this photograph was taken Williamson was working in Brooklyn, New York and it's likely this photograph was taken there.

Daguerreotypes were very fragile due to the glass-like surface and were commonly bound in protective leather and velvet cases.

Carte de visite of an unknown seated woman

Owen Angel

About 1870-1873

This full-length side portrait of a woman seated at a table was taken by Owen Angel, an engraver and lithographer based in Exeter who, from the 1850s onwards, specialised in portrait photography. He was one of a number of craftsmen who saw the commercial potential of this exciting new artform and decided to open their own photographic studios.

Carte de visite of unknown woman

Owen Angel

About 1860s

Cartes de visite are small photographic visiting cards that were popular from the 1860s until the 1910s. Unlike the formal visiting cards used when paying social calls, cartes de visite were also exchanged between friends and family.

They often had the photographer's name and studio address printed on the back. This allowed the person receiving the card to know who had taken the photograph. Owen Angel was prolific, and would have produced many cartes de visite like this one during his career. Photographs taken by him can be found in collections across the United Kingdom.

Window 2

Bellows Camera

Between 1860-1880

The camera is a beautiful piece of Victorian engineering, the leather and velvet lens cover is a rare example as caps often become separated and lost.

This particular camera is likely the property of a local Victorian photographer Owen Angel, as the inscription on the name plaque reads 'O.Angel/Exeter'. He had a studio in Exeter from 1855 until the early 1900s. There are no records of Owen Angel manufacturing or selling camera equipment, which means that this camera was most likely his studio camera for his main portraiture work.

This style of camera was quite a sophisticated and expensive piece of technology, so only people who could afford them would have them. The photograph would be taken on a glass plate and then fixed using different chemicals. The people being photographed would have to sit still for up to half an hour so the photo would not be blurry.

As cameras developed, photos could be taken more quickly, and in some cases, be developed within the camera itself – for example, Polaroid Cameras.

Window 3

Photogravure of Miss Linter

Gunn and Stuart

Between 1900-1905

Miss Juliana Emma Linter was born in Teignmouth, Devon in 1844, a shell collector, primarily of land snail shells. Over 15,000 recent and fossilised shells from all over the world were donated to RAMM following her death in 1909. You can see some of her many specimens on display in RAMM's Finders Keepers? Gallery.

The photographic studio of Gunn and Stuart, in Richmond, Surrey, was a partnership between Charles James Angel Isaac Gunn and his brother-in-law William Slade Stuart. They were active between 1888 and 1905.

Gunn became a member of the Photographic Society (later The Royal Photographic Society) in 1889. In September 1896, he earned a Royal Warrant for the studio. Not long after obtaining their Royal Warrant, the studio photographed the Queen for a Diamond Jubilee Portrait. After the studio partnership dissolved, Gunn had to file for bankruptcy.

Photogravure of Captain Robert Falcon Scott

Mauil & Fox

1905

This print shows the famous explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott (1868-1912). Scott was born in Plymouth and led two expeditions to Antarctica. Scott's first successful 'Discovery Expedition' in 1901-1904 captured the public imagination and he became a household name.

This photograph was taken in 1905 at the height of this fame and would have been sold commercially. Scott signed with his initials and 'Captain R.N.' on the bottom right corner of this print.

Polar exploration was an extremely dangerous undertaking, and Captain Scott died during his second Antarctic expedition in 1912, while making the return journey, after being beaten to the South Pole by Norwegian Roald Amundsen. Following his death, Scott became a national hero, and his name continues to be synonymous with the Antarctic to this day.

Window 4

Photograph of Miss Caroline Maria Tremlett

John Ross Browning

1894

This photograph is of Caroline Maria Tremlett aged 100. It was taken on the 8th June 1894. Caroline was born on the 4th October 1793 and died at age 102 in 1896. She never married and at the time of her death was living at 7 Queens Terrace, Exeter.

Caroline was a governess, who would have been employed in a private household to educate the family's children. In the 19th century, this was seen as one of the few respectable occupations an unmarried middle-class woman could pursue.

The photograph was taken by John Ross Browning, an Australian hired by William Durrant and Edward Henry Cox to run their Exeter studio in Bedford Circus, while they ran a new studio in Torquay. Browning became a well-known local photographer, and there are a number of photographs from his studio in the collection at RAMM.

Studio portrait of Mr and Mrs Hallett

E. Stewart

About 1890-1895

This portrait was taken by a commercial photographer who worked from a studio at the newly built Post Office in the High Street, Exeter.

Mr and Mrs Hallett are very formally posed, wearing their smartest clothes. Their clothing and three-quarter length composition of the portrait suggests this is from the 1890s. Mrs Hallett is holding a book, which was a common prop that could imply that the holder was able to read; not everyone could. Props were also there to make the sitter feel less nervous and give them something to focus on.

Window 5

Reverse of studio portrait

Fry Bros

About 1890

This is the back of a studio portrait by Fry Bros, of The Eastgate Studio in Exeter.

In the 1800s, photography was a ground-breaking invention that gradually became more accessible. Commercial photography studios allowed everyday people a way to capture their likeness.

A photograph would have cost anywhere between 1-20 shillings (around £3-£30 today), with prices rising depending on the number of people in the photo and the skill of the photographer. Sought-after photographers could charge significantly more.

Studio portrait of unknown young woman

Between 1898-1902

Reverse of photograph showing an advertisement

About 1895

W.P. Little

This studio portrait was taken by W.P. Little, who had a studio at 30 South Street, Exeter. Commercial studios were artificial environments, so photographers would often take portraits against a painted backdrop and provide props for the sitter to pose with. This gave the finished photograph a more three-dimensional and natural feel, the draped fur seen here adds texture and contrasts with the bright white of the sitter's dress.

The second photograph is the reverse of another photograph by Little, showing the decorative advertisement for his business.

By the beginning of the 20th century each town and city would have multiple studios, and rival photographers were competing for the same customers. Advertisements on the back of photographic prints were an effective way of marketing their businesses to new customers.

By the time these photographs were taken, amateur photography had begun to be more accessible to the general public. The Kodak #1 camera was introduced in 1888 and soon gave rise to the type of snapshot photography we are familiar with today. Photography became an increasingly popular hobby, and while there continued to be a thriving market for studio portraits, it was no longer the only type of photography available.

Window 6

Photograph of Miss Dawson and her dog

Unknown photographer

About 1910

This is an Edwardian photograph showing an elegant lady with her dog. The sitter is identified as 'Miss Dawson', but we don't know anything else about her. In the late 19th century, pet ownership became increasingly popular among the upper classes, and people loved their pets just as much we do today. Well-bred dogs became a symbol of status, and capturing the bond between humans and their pets was a popular subject for photographers.

At this time, the relationship between humans and animals began to be celebrated more widely in art and photography, reflecting the changing attitudes towards pets as valued companions and family members. Faster exposure times made this much easier, as animals do not often sit still.

Julien Parsons and his dog Bella

Brendan Barry
2019

Brendan Barry is an Exeter-based photographer, educator, and camera-maker. In June 2019 he installed a giant camera in Exeter's Northernhay Gardens next to RAMM. Made from a shipping container, the 'Container Camera', doubled as large-format-camera and a darkroom. He said, 'it is basically the world's biggest, slowest, and most impractical Polaroid camera.'

Here he captured Julien Parsons and his 'highly strung but loveable' border terrier Bella.

On many of the days the camera was in operation, people from local charities, community groups, and education centres were invited along for workshops. They created paper negatives and then contacted printed them to produce a positive image. On other days the camera was open to the public, offering the opportunity for people to experience traditional image-making processes for free. At the end of the time the space was transformed into a gallery where all of the images made within it were exhibited.