It is again a great pleasure to be guest editor of our journal.

Of the articles in this issue several run along similar themes of family, the sea and ships. Both the Sawyer article and the final part on the Johnston Collection involve all three. Lydell Sawyer and his extended family ran photographic businesses in North East England and could not avoid being involved with the sea and those who made their livelihoods from it. While the Johnston Collection is the result of several generations of the same family the best known, and possibly the best, images from the Collection are of the great herring boom, the “silver darlings”, and all that surrounded this. Sawyer’s best known image “Waiting for the Boats” is of a similar subject and though partially staged managed was taken during the same period. Additionally both Sawyer and the Johnstons were adept at carefully composed studio photography using lighting and composition to great effect.

It is particularly unfortunate that J.W. Kensett’s photographs of Brunel’s Great Eastern have been lost as they would undoubtedly have added to our knowledge of that time and the outstanding engineering achievements of the Victorians. However Dr Levitt’s article reminds us of the huge popularity that photography and photographic exhibitions enjoyed in the 1850s and 1860s perhaps only equalled or exceeded by the almost ubiquitous use of digital images at present. Everyone it now appears has a camera. It is also interesting to note that 2013 is the midpoint of the 150th anniversary of that terrible and destructive event, the American Civil War, 1861 to 1865. The Metropolitan Museum in New York is currently showing two major exhibitions of photographs and paintings made during this and it is highly likely that many images known to JW’s cousin, John Frederick Kensett and show in the 1864 Metropolitan fair will once again be on view to visitors to the city.

Also included are some further thoughts on the Historical Group’s 40th anniversary, both from home and abroad. We are delighted to have a contribution from the very active and dynamic Victorian Chapter whose monograph on Walter Woodbury was an outstanding example of historical research well conducted and equally well presented.

And finally our fulsome congratulations to Colin Ford CBE, Hon FRPS for the well-deserved award bestowed on him by the Hungarian Government.

Donald Stewart August 2013.

CONTRIBUTORS

Geoff Lowe, NDD, ATD, was for nearly thirty years a Senior Lecturer on the BA (Hons) Fine Art course at Newcastle-upon-Tyne Polytechnic, now Northumbria University. Although trained as a painter he was a photographer during National Service with the RAF. He is now retired from teaching and spends his time combining both painting and photography, the one informing the other, at his studio near Brighton. In the last few years with the advent of the digital age, he has researched his fine collection of Lyddell Sawyer images assembled over many years, and is organising an exhibition and publication to celebrate one of Britain’s most important photographers.

Dr Ruth Levitt is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of North American Studies, King’s College London. This article draws on her research and forthcoming book on the social history of Britain and America in the 18th and 19th centuries as illuminated through the Kensetts, a family of artisans. Kensetts were ordinary skilled working people in a wide range of occupations in Britain, America and Australia. They provide an important perspective on a period of great social and technological change. Articles on these issues and other Kensetts have been published in The Actuary, The Historian and Local History Magazine, and further articles will appear this year in History Today, Garden History and BBC History Magazine.

Dr Mike Hallett FRPS is an active photographer, educator and writer who chairs the RPS Education Committee.

Elaine Herbert ARPS is the Hon. Secretary of the Victoria Chapter in Australia. She is an active and accomplished photographer and photohistorian with a strong interest in early Australian photography.
No fewer than eleven of the images on display at the Photographic Society of London’s exhibition in February 1858 depicted the steamship *Great Eastern* (known briefly as the *Leviathan*) designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859).

Robert Howlett (1830-1858), the only professional photographer of the four, was a partner at Joseph Cundall’s Photographic Institution in New Bond Street, whose prestigious commissions included photographing items from the royal art collection for Prince Albert, making portraits of prominent individuals and views of important places and events. Of the 53 pictures by Howlett displayed in this exhibition, five showed details of the *Leviathan*’s deck, bows, paddle wheel and cradles, hydraulic ram pumps and launching drums; one showed preparations for the launch and one was a long distance shot of the vessel taken from the opposite bank of the river at Deptford. Also on display was Howlett’s now iconic photographic portrait of Brunel in front of the chains of one of the *Great Eastern*’s launching drums, taken in November 1857. The Athenæum’s reviewer said that Howlett’s *Leviathan* pictures:

“...show us its mountain walls of iron, its rooms of chains and cables, its drums and paddles, its lungs, heart, and blood-vessels; more especially its motor, Mr. Brunel, smoking calm and sly under a small Alps of Cyclop cables and chains.”

Harral’s engraving of this image was published in the weekly *Illustrated Times* in January 1858, thereby helping to spread knowledge of that photograph as well as of the *Great Eastern* and Brunel himself.

**SS Great Eastern**

The *Great Eastern* was the third of Brunel’s innovative steamships, a vast structure, even larger than his SS *Great Western* (1837) and SS *Great...
Britain (1843). It was nearly 700 ft long with a double metal hull and weighed almost 19,000 tons unladen; it had capacity for 4,000 passengers and was intended to ply the long routes to India and the Far East without needing to refuel. It had five steam engines to drive its two huge paddle wheels and screw propeller, as well as masts and sails, and it took nearly four years to build at a cost of about £500,000 (£39 million today), by John Scott Russell’s firm at Napier Yard in Millwall on the Thames at the Isle of Dogs. The first attempt to launch this massive structure sideways down the slipway in October 1857 failed, as did subsequent tries, because subsidence beneath the concrete foundations had produced an uneven surface and gradient. Eventually Brunel installed hydraulic rams to force the ship to move inch by inch, taking many days, until it floated on the river on 31 January 1858. These technical errors and the handling of them also caused serious injuries to a number of the workmen, damage to machines and equipment, soaring costs and ignominy for an already struggling Brunel. He died in the following year, just as the Great Eastern was fully fitted out and ready for her maiden voyage.

South Kensington Museum

The arrangements for the Photographic Society’s exhibition in 1858 were novel. It had held the first of its annual exhibitions at the Gallery of the Society of British Artists in Pall Mall East in 1854, and the next three nearby in Suffolk Street at the Gallery of the Society of Water Colour Painters. However, the Council announced to the Annual General Meeting on 2 February 1858 that:

"A most advantageous offer of a large and commodious Exhibition-room, at the South Kensington Museum, has induced the Council to hold an extra Exhibition during the months of February, March and April, which they hope will be more than usually interesting from the promised cooperation of the principal members of the French Society. It is contemplated to open the usual annual Exhibition in these our own premises during the months of May, June and July."

The “extra” exhibition opened on 15 February 1858 and closed in April, was packed up and taken to 1 New Coventry Street to reopen on 15 May, with many of the same pictures. Possibly Henry Cole (1808-1882), head of the government’s new Department of Science and Art within the Board of Trade, had had the idea of inviting the Society to bring its exhibition to the South Kensington Museum. The Museum itself, largely Cole’s brainchild, had opened eight months earlier in temporary buildings erected in the grounds of Brompton Park House, on the south east corner of the rural 86 acre site that the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 had bought with some of the profits from the Great Exhibition, to achieve Prince Albert’s vision of bringing the British institutions of learning, science, industry and culture together in one place:

"...increasing the means of industrial education and extending the influence of science and art upon productive industry".

By the end of the century the tangible expression of that vision included new roads and new institutions: Cromwell Road, Exhibition Road and Prince Albert’s Road (now Queen’s Gate), Imperial Institute Road and Prince Consort Road. The South Kensington Museum (renamed the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1899), lacked only its southern block with Cromwell Road frontage (1909); the School of Design and its collection were moved from Marlborough House to a new building linked to the refurbished Brompton Park House. At the southern end of Exhibition Road the Natural History Museum was open and construction of what would become the Science Museum was underway; Imperial Institute, the Royal College of Music and the Royal Albert Hall were built further up on that side, where the 20 acres of Royal Horticultural Society Gardens had existed between 1861 and 1886.

The South Kensington Museum was in its temporary home until 1866. Prince Albert had wanted the architect Gottfried Semper to design this
building but that scheme proved too costly so Albert proposed a 30 ft high iron framed and corrugated iron clad structure, 266 x 126 ft containing three long galleries on two floors. Dubbed the “Brompton Boilers”, it was certainly not considered to be an architectural gem: “…hideously ugly”,”…its ugliness is unmitigated”.

By 1857 Cole was an influential figure in the world of museums, exhibitions, industrial design and technical education, and close to Prince Albert. He had joined the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce in 1845 (through John Scott Russell) where he became a forceful member of the group that conceived and delivered the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851. From 1853 Cole ran the Department of Science and Art, tasked with reforming design education; it moved into Brompton Park House in 1857. Cole had also obtained £5,000 (over £391,000 today) from the Board of Trade to buy items from the Great Exhibition for the School of Design’s own collection, then at Marlborough House, which went on display in 1852 and was transferred to Brompton. The South Kensington Museum opened in June 1857 with Cole as its Superintendent, a position he held until 1873. The Times wrote:

“Everything has been done to render the new Museum a source of instruction and enjoyment to all classes alike, the exigencies of time being taken into consideration, as well as the exigencies of the pocket.”

Another of Cole’s influential associates was Joseph Cundall (1818-1895), who took charge of the South Kensington Museum’s publications and the photographing of its collections between 1866 and 1889. As well as being a founder member of the Photographic Society and establishing the Photographic Institution, Cundall was a reputed designer and publisher of children’s and other quality books, and Cole had commissioned publishing projects from him in the 1840s.

The exhibition

Another of Cole’s innovations for the new Museum was to provide visitors with refreshments. He obtained Prince Albert’s agreement to commission Captain Francis Fowke of the Royal Engineers to design a suitable space. It was a two storey brick construction with a mock Tudor veneer and opened in New Coventry Street in May 1858, where it had moved its own offices.

The Society hosted a Soirée at the Museum on 13 March 1858, at which:

“The centre of attraction was the Society’s Exhibition of Photographs, which has lately been much enriched by a numerous and beautiful collection sent by the French Photographic Society. A great part of the Museum, and the large Board-room (which was turned into a refreshment-room), was also lighted up and thrown open for the occasion.”

However, the news value of Brunel’s Great Eastern was evaporating. By the time the Exhibition had re-opened in New Coventry Street in May 1858, the Society realised that:

“The ‘Leviathan’ is now, to a great extent, lost to public interest, and we do not see the desirability of continuing to exhibit photographs of her, when there are other and more important subjects demanding space and attention.”

Indeed, the Athenaeum’s reviewer had already called the Leviathan the “nine days’ wonder” in February, and the Literary Gazette’s reviewer noted:

“Subjects of passing interest are not wanting, such as The Leviathan in the various stages of her amphibious existence…”

The Literary Gazette said:

“…this agreeable exhibition has at length taken refuge in that miscellaneous Noah’s ark – the South Kensington Museum”

and visitors were advised that:

“The Brompton and Putney Omnibuses pass every five minutes.”

But in the opinion of William Crookes, Secretary of the Society and editor of its Journal:

“…a more out-of-the-way place could not have been chosen.”

The exhibition was open daily between 10 am and 5 pm with evening opening between 7pm and 10 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays at Brompton and every day at New Coventry Street. Tickets cost one shilling, or sixpence in the evenings, and a season ticket was five shillings. For the subsequent annual exhibitions to 1864 the Society reverted to the two locations it had previously favoured, in Suffolk Street and Pall Mall East. For a number of years from 1868 it used a space at 9 Conduit Street, off Regent Street, in the building where it had moved its own offices.

James Wittingham Kensett

Kensett’s two Leviathan photographs, now lost, were priced at six shillings each (over £24.75 today); the price tag for most pictures in the show was between five and seven shillings. He was named in the list of exhibitors (although not all amateurs were), but he does not appear elsewhere in the Society’s records or the Journal and no other definite information about his activities as a photographer has come to light. He grew up in Hampton Wick near Hampton Court, third of the seven children of Francis and Anna Kensett. His father died in 1836 and money was short, so the two youngest boys were sent to a charity school in Brixton. All the siblings except James, and their widowed mother, emigrated.
to Australia between 1840 and 1860, where they worked at various trades: drapers and outfitters, tents and tarpaulins suppliers, blacking manufacture, wholesale dry goods imports; one was a ship’s captain, another a governess.

James Kensett remained in England for many years, initially working as a teacher at Charles Fenner’s school in Hampton Court village. He married Eliza Jane in about 1852 and they had a daughter, Jeannie. He may have applied for a passport in 1857, around the time he was experimenting with photography and put his Leviathan pictures in for the Society’s forthcoming extra exhibition at the South Kensington Museum.

In the following decade Kensett moved to America with his wife and teenage daughter. In 1868 they crossed the Atlantic from Liverpool in the Cunard Line’s steamship Scotia, which was then the second largest ship in the world after the Great Eastern and may have reminded Kensett of his Millwall photographs. Cousins from Hampton Court had settled in America in the early years of the century and may have been in contact. JW Kensett was a talented and versatile individual: in America he first worked as an engineer in Troy in New York State, and invented a new type of metallic fireproof lathing for use in building construction. It was a special kind of plastering to use on wooden surfaces inside buildings which incorporated corrugated, heat-conducting metallic strips within the plaster. He obtained a US patent for the invention in 1876, and explained:

“My method is applicable to any possible conformation of surface, and is intended to cover all wooden parts of buildings, including walls, floors, ceilings, roofs, window frames, doors and door frames. It is capable of any species of ornamental moulding. It is especially applicable to railway-cars, grain elevators, stairways, &c., of houses, theatres, and public halls.”

By 1880 he was involved with the US Government Survey, perhaps as an engineer or a photographer, and had moved to Newport, Rhode Island. There he set up his own Kensett Lathe Co. to develop and manufacture the patented lathing. By then he was around sixty, and continued well into his late seventies, working also as a “stenographer”. Perhaps in that connection in 1886 Kensett succeeded in obtaining another US patent, this one for a protective holder for pens and pencils:

"Heretofore pen-holders as well as pencils have been provided with what are known as “anti-nervous” devices, whereby the fingers of the writer are prevented from coming into contact with the metallic stock of the pen, whereby the disease known as “writer’s paralysis” may be avoided. It is the purpose of my present invention to provide a device which shall not only accomplish the purpose first above named, but which may also be used as a shield or protection for the point of the pen or pencil, as the case may be, whereby not only s the point protected when not in use, but an extended hand-hold is given to a shortened stump.”

Kensett made at least two trips back to England, in 1881 and 1890. Eventually in 1901 he and Eliza Jane came back for good and settled in Bristol, close to her relations; he died aged 84.

American photographers

It is possible that when JW Kensett first arrived in America he got in touch with John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872), his cousin in New York City (their grandparents were brothers), who had become a successful landscape painter. The artist’s father, Thomas Kensett, was born in Hampton Court village and emigrated to America in 1802, where he worked as an engraver in Connecticut before moving to New York to pioneer experiments in food canning, which his eldest son, also Thomas Kensett, took forward with great success in Baltimore. John Frederick Kensett trained as an engraver initially too, apprenticed to a maternal uncle in New Haven and to the renowned Peter Maverick in New York City, before deciding to switch to painting.

The first daguerreotypes in America were made in late 1839 soon after Daguerre’s book arrived in New York via his agent M Gourard, who lectured about it at an exhibition gallery at 57 Broadway. In 1840 JF Kensett came into contact with these early photographic endeavours through the firm of Hall, Cushman and Packard, banknote engravers in Albany, New York state, where he was working. TH Cushman stood down from the partnership in that year in order to set up his own photographic business, in the same building. In January 1841 Cushman advertised his gallery of photographic displays and offered instructions in “portrait and landscape taking.”

However, the toxic chemicals that photographers exposed themselves to took a significant toll, and Cushman and Robert Howlett in England were amongst those who died prematurely. A relative of Cushman later wrote: “… he most unfortunately engaged in Daguerreotyping, though then an embryo art, which could only be made available by an extended series of experiments, exposed to the un-healthful fumes of the necessary materials; and though remarkably robust from early childhood, and without ever having experienced serious illness, in less than a year he had laid the foundation for the total ruin of his health, which sank irretrievably under the...
anxieties and un-healthful application which it 
exacted.”25

Nevertheless, photography’s appeal proved irresistible to Americans. At the time of the Photographic Society’s exhibition at the South Kensington Museum, the New York Times estimated that there were 200 photography galleries in New York City alone, producing an average of 50 pictures a day and a total annual income of $2m (over $42m today).24

JF Kensett had further contact with photographers during the American Civil War in the 1860s. Because of his standing in the arts community and his record of actively contributing to professional and cultural initiatives, he was approached in December 1863 by the US Sanitary Commission in New York to chair a committee to organise the art section of the Metropolitan Fair, which was to be held in the following April to raise money for medical relief for the Union army. It was also to be a huge patriotic and confidence-building undertaking, to showcase: “...Northern progress in art, industry, and war [and which] offered visitors a multi-faceted display of both the useful and the ornamental. While this abundance of goods alarmed some contemporaries, the majority heralded this demonstration of affluence and prosperity as an assurance that Northern society was solvent and even thriving in spite of a crippling war.”25

Kensett recruited the prominent American photographer Mathew Brady (1822-1896) to the committee, as well as several other artists. Brady was running a team of photographers in the battlefields who were documenting the conflict in unprecedented detail. The photographers converted horse-drawn wagons into mobile darkrooms close to the fighting, and messengers on horseback carried the resulting images back to the newspaper offices in the cities, where they were engraved and published for a mass audience.

Whereas Roger Fenton (1819-1869), a founder, first Hon. Secretary and later Vice-President of the Photographic Society, had chosen not to make images of the dead and dying on the battlefields of the Crimea, to avoid depressing morale, particularly among the army’s supporters at home, Brady’s images of Union and Confederate corpses and wounded men where they fell, notably after the battles at Antietam (1862) and Gettysburg (1863), were shocking to most non-combatants who had never before seen such scenes. Some of their images were published as engravings in Harper’s Weekly, some were exhibited at Brady’s gallery in New York.26

For the Metropolitan Fair, Brady and others photographed the installation of the art works and Brady took portraits of JF Kensett’s committee members, and other scenes of the Fair. After the Fair closed, committee members were presented with an album of Brady’s photographs. Another of the installation photographers was Jeremiah Gurney (1812-1895), who offered Fair visitors a personal photographic service:

“The photographic studio is daily becoming more popular. Messrs. GURNEY & SON have fitted up a very neat and comfortable gallery in the building, and are prepared to take the pictures of all who wish them at $5 per dozen, the proceeds to be given to the fund of the Fair. The Messrs. GURNEY have taken great trouble in this matter, have built a light which is equal to, if not superior to the one they have at their regular gallery, and can take pictures at the fair which are not to be excelled in the City.”27

Notes
2. John Scott Russell (1810-1882) was an engineer and naval architect who had designed steam carriages and canal barges at the start of his career before briefly becoming editor of Railway Chronicle and then Secretary of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce (1848-50).
3. Journal of the Photographic Society of London, 4/63 (22 February 1858), p. 157. The Society briefly had offices at 1 New Coventry Street, between Piccadilly and Leicester Square. The exhibition also included a room displaying photographs by a team of soldiers of the Royal Engineers using photography for the Ordnance Survey.
5. Lloyds, 29 March 1857.
6. The Builder, 1858.
9. Henry Cole, Diary, 12 February 1858.
11. ibid., p. 169.
14. Literary Gazette, 20 February 1858, p. 185.
15. The Press, 27 February 1858, p. 23.
17. Art Journal, 40 (April 1858), p. 120.
18. US patent 181,851 5 September 1876.
21. The firm took on other partners and later became one of seven to merge in 1858 to become the American Bank Note Company.
23. HW Cushman: the descendants of Robert Cushman, the Puritan, from the year 1617 to 1855, Boston, MA, Little, Brown, 1855, p. 363.
24. JL Rosenheim, op.cit., p. 239.
25. CE Moore, Art as text, war as context: the art gallery of the Metropolitan Fair, New York City's artistic community, and the civil war, PhD dissertation, Boston University, 2009, p. 237.
26. Brady opened his gallery at 207 Broadway and Fulton Street in 1847 and published a Gallery of Illustrious Americans in 1850, lithographs based on his daguerreotypes; JL Rosenheim, op.cit., p. 230.