

# OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

## DATING OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

There are many ways of dating an old photograph, best used in combination. The type and size of the picture, the style of dress, the pose, the location and props all help to suggest a date. The fashions of both men and women changed decade by decade. A great deal can be learnt from military uniforms, including any cap, collar, trade or qualification badges, medals, shoulder flashes or wound stripes. There are several good books on the subject. The following notes have been compiled using:

"Dating Old Photographs", by Robert Pols (who has written several other books on old photographs), and "Family History in Focus", by Don Steel & Lawrence Taylor. Both these books have dating charts.

## TYPES OF PHOTOGRAPH

Most old photographs date from the 1850s or later. Although Louis Daguerre invented the "Daguerrotype" and William Fox Talbot invented the "Calotype" in the 1840s, the number of these types was small. Frederick Scott Archer invented the glass negative from which paper prints could be made. This led to the rapid expansion of professional photography during the 1850s. Apparently the 1851 census showed 51 commercial photographers, whereas by 1861 there were 2,534. It was not until the 1880s that short exposure times of less than a second became possible; before then, one or two minutes were required. Celluloid film was invented by George Eastman in the 1890s, followed by his Kodak box Brownie camera in 1900.

Old family photographs fall into two main categories – professional portraits, usually in a studio, and home snapshots, usually outdoors. The earliest professional portraits usually found were printed from a glass negative on to albumen paper, which was paper coated with egg white. By 1866 about 6 million eggs a year were being used. The natural colour of an albumen print is sepia with perhaps a yellowish tone. It has a smooth surface and slightly glossy finish. It is fragile and easily creased, which is why they were usually pasted on to card. Although albumen prints tended to become yellow and to fade, this kind of paper was used until the 1890s, when it was superseded by gelatine (bromide) paper. There were also "ambrotypes", which were thin under-exposed glass negatives with a backing of black velvet or black shellac, giving a positive effect. The usual size was about 2 ¼ by 3 ¼ inches, although sizes up to 6 ½ by 8 ½ (full plate) could be made. They were often framed or cased.

In the 1850s there was a rapid rise in the popularity of photographic visiting cards – "cartes de visite". These were albumen prints pasted on to a photographer's trade card about 4 by 2 ½ inches. Cards of famous people were sold, collected, exchanged and put into albums, sometimes along with cards of family members. The craze for these cards fell off during the 1860s. The next popular product was the "cabinet print", which was slightly larger at about 4 ½ by 6 ½ inches.

A form of photography popular from the 1850s right into the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the "tintype", which was a small photograph taken on a thin sheet of iron with a special camera which could take up to 36 exposures on one sheet. They were mainly used by itinerant photographers, e.g. at fairgrounds. Each one was 1 ½ by 2 ½ inches or less. The image was poor and they were really only novelties.

From about 1875 the range of sizes of print increased. There were "promenade prints" of 7 by 4 inches, "boudoir prints" of 8 ½ by 5 ¼ inches and, later, "panel prints" of 5 ¼ by 1 ¾ inches or 8 ¼ by 4 inches. There were also "coupon prints", a strip of upright rectangles each 3 ½ by 1 ½ inches. None of these were much used for family portraits, however. Postcards appeared in the 1890s, initially smaller than the present size of 5 ½ by 3 ½ inches, which was introduced in 1899.

Roll film photographs could date from the late 1890s but most are 20<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest Kodaks took circular pictures 2 ½ inches in diameter. The first Brownies took 2 ¼ inch square pictures but this was soon changed to 2 ¼ by 3 ¼ inches when the No. 2 Brownie appeared. Shortly before WW1 the Kodak Vest Pocket camera appeared, using 127 roll film at 2 ½ by 1 inches. However, many other sizes of film were tried, also new cameras sometimes gave different results with standard roll film.

## WOMEN'S CLOTHING

Women's clothes of the 1840s had a restrictive tight-sleeved silhouette with a smooth bell-shaped skirt. In the 1850s they were more exuberant, frilled and flounced. They were very full-skirted by the early 1860s, by which time the artificial crinoline had become fashionable; there was also a liking for rather large-scale geometrical patterns decorating the skirt and sleeves. After 1865 the skirt became much narrower and developed fullness at the back as the bustle came into fashion between the late 1860s and early 1870s. The hair style also changed and was often piled high in front and arranged in a large bun at the rear. After the mid 1870s the skirt became tighter in front until

the slim silhouette of the late 1870s and early 1880s was achieved. In the mid 1880s the bustle was revived and the line became simpler, having greater vertical emphasis than in the mid 1870s. Hats were impressively high.

By the 1890s the sleeves were the main elements of fashion to note; they became much more rounded and full in outline, with the skirts becoming simpler in cut, and flared. Sleeves and skirts were much more closely cut towards the end of the decade and by 1900 had developed into the sleek and sinuous curves which characterised the Edwardian belle. The line straightened in the years immediately before the First World War, with skirts shortening in 1915-16.

## **MEN'S CLOTHING**

The fashionable suit of the 1840s was very tight, almost moulded to the figure. Coat collars were high at the back, shirt collars high and cravats large. The shoulder line was sloping, and the sleeve narrow and very long with the cuff sometimes unbuttoned at the wrist. Waistcoats often had large fancy patterns. Trousers were fitted, sometimes held beneath the boot with a strap. In the early 1850s there was a slight relaxation of cut. Collars of both coat and shirt became lower so that the large looser cravat is very noticeable. In the later 1850s and early 1860s, suits began to be made very loose-fitting, the waist seam was low and sleeves and trousers were wide. Many jackets were fastened with their top button only. Since beards and whiskers were fashionable it is sometimes difficult to see the low shirt collars and the narrow ties. There was great variety of style, especially for informal dress. For sports, the Norfolk jacket, pleated and belted and usually worn with baggy knickerbockers, was introduced. Tweed suits began to be worn by all classes.

In the 1870s, suits were cut more tightly. the double-breasted fastening can often be seen, either square cut and disconcertingly late 20<sup>th</sup> century in appearance, or with a wide cut-away and a marked diagonal line. In the 1880s, the line became noticeably straighter and narrower. The fashions of the 1890s look much more relaxed. The suits were wide cut with low square shoulders, longer jackets and wider trousers (by the end of the century, there have a central crease; on informal occasions they may also be turned up at the bottom). The blazer, exclusively worn as a sports jacket at its introduction in the late 1870s, had become accepted for most informal summer occasions. A new fashion in the 1890s was the cummerbund.

Hats were generally worn. The top hat, formal headgear throughout the period, is the most difficult to date. the tallest were those of the 1840s, 1850s and 1880s. Quite low ones were worn in the 1860s and 1890s. The bowler was popular from the 1860s. In its earlier form it was very low with a noticeable central knob. In the 1880s and 1890s it became very high. Less formal were soft felt hats usually worn with country clothes. In the 1860s, they were wide-brimmed but during the 1870s and 1880s, they were made stiffer with a more regular crease. The "Homburg" was introduced by the Prince of Wales in the 1870s and soon became popular. For sports, peaked caps and deerstalkers with ear flaps were worn. Summer photographs from the late 1870s will show most of the men in straw "boaters".

## **STUDIO BACKGROUND AND PROPS**

Early settings were generally simple. People stand or sit against neutral backgrounds, with or without a curtain hanging at one side. If the subject is seated, he or she may be at a small table or writing desk, and may be holding a book. Favoured in the mid 1860s was the classical look, with columns, arches, plinths and balustrades. Towards the end of the 1860s, chairs were often used for leaning on with one hand rather than for sitting on. Painted windows looking out a painted country scene were added. This fashion faded away in the 1870s when, instead of offering glimpses of a supposed rural world, the studio was made to look as though it was outdoors. Large backdrops of natural settings were used, and props were provided to match. Stiles, rock gardens, bridges, fences and landscaped steps were set against masses of painted foliage. Seaside backgrounds were also used. This continued into the 1880s, with more elaboration. Indoor settings sometimes added a Chinese or Japanese screen. More exotic indoor settings were used in the 1890s, with pot plants, palm trees, etc.

## **COMPOSITION**

Until the 1870s, full-length figures were the most common. Later, the camera tended to move closer, giving a three-quarter image. Close-ups of head and shoulders were used in the 1890s.

*Since these notes were written, Robert Pols has published "Dating Nineteenth Century Photographs" and "Dating Twentieth Century Photographs", replacing "Dating Old Photographs". Both are published by and obtainable from the Federation of Family History Societies or from North Cheshire FHS.*