

Dating Antique Photographs

by Ken Ford

Early in 2024 FOBMAG became affiliated to the Lancashire Local History Federation. As a result we get notice of events and talks organised by other member groups or organisations. In May 2024 we received notice of two free workshops with an associated handbook on Dating Antique Photographs. It took place at UCLan organised by one of their lecturers, Brandon Reece Taylor, funded by the Institute of Creativity, Communities and Culture.

My wife, Jill, and I decided to go and for the first session we were asked to take some old family photographs. We learned how to identify the different types from the earliest Daguerreotype to the popular Carte de Visite and the later Cabinet Cards. Ours were all of the latter sort, being larger (4¼" by

6½") and on thicker card than the earlier types. They included these two: Jill's great aunt Maud and my father.

To date the cards it was suggested that we try to find when the photographers were active and at what addresses. Also examine the style of clothing and look at any items featured in the shots. But because of our research into family history we knew when our photographs were taken (in 1900 and 1906), so I thought I would acquire some more to work on in our second session. I found a job lot on ebay for less than £1 a card. I chose them because they were from a variety of places in the UK, America and the Continent.

In this example on the left J Peterson & Son are the photographers. Jens Peterson (1829-1905) opened his Copenhagen studios in 1854 moving to 34 Ostergade in 1880. In 1889 he became a co-owner with his son. The firm held a Warrant of the Danish Royal Family – the coat of arms is at the top of the reverse side.



Also on the reverse it states that the company was awarded many medals, the latest of which was a 1st Class Medal in 1888. So this card would have been produced not long after that, probably about 1890.



This second example was produced by James Russell & Sons who were active in London from the 1850s to the 1940s. It states on the bottom of the cabinet card that he established his business in 1852. Their addresses from 1883 to 1908 were as follows:

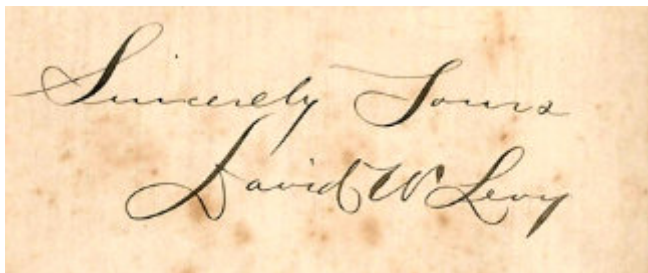
- 1883-1885 29 Union Road, Tufnell Park
- 1884-1888 199 Brompton Road S.W.
- 1886-1899 49 Brecknock Road N.
- 1889-1908 17 Baker Street

Since this card lists Brompton Road and Brecknock Road it must have been produced in 1886, '87 or '88. The only example I have seen with an identical legend on the bottom is one of the Bishop of Exeter taken in 1886. The National Portrait Gallery holds 692 of their cards with photographs of prominent politicians, authors and clergymen. Russell & Sons also photographed European and British royalty, displaying their coats of arms on the cards



Russell & Sons photographs of: Bishop of Exeter 1886; Prince of Wales and family 1884; Queen Victoria 1890s

Although in the first two examples I was able to obtain the date within a year or two I could not name the sitter – neither did I expect to. However when I'd finished researching the card on the right I had a lot more than the man's name! It didn't look promising when I found that the photographer was based in Quincy and there are 17 towns called Quincy in the United States.



But I had a stroke of good luck – there was a name written on the back. Could David W Levy be the name of the sitter?



Putting the name and the town in a search engine produced the amazing result on the right – an 1889 passport application with a matching signature:

I now knew his age, 21, his occupation, clothing salesman and a full physical description of him. Mission accomplished - but I was intrigued to find out more.

The 1870 US Census showed his father, Joseph, to have been born in Prussia and in the wholesale clothing business. His mother was born in Hanover but all five children were born in the USA. The 1880 Census showed they had eight children and two servants living with them.

I wondered why he wanted a passport. I then found his name on a passenger list for the *Servia* returning from Liverpool in 1889. It seems a possibility he came to Lancashire to buy cloth for the family clothing firm.

The 1905 Census records him as an underwear manufacturer, single and living as a boarder in New York. In 1913 at the age of 46 he married 28 years old Viola F Altmayer in New York. Online I found a biography of her father, Aaron R Altmayer who died in 1910. He was a wealthy department store owner and property developer with shops in New York and in Savannah, where he lived for a time. In 1885 he paid \$75,000 to build a new store there. In 1920 the Levy's were living with Viola's widowed mother Blanche and a servant in prestigious Park Avenue, New York. I also discovered that Blanche took the Knickerbocker Trust Bank to court in 1910 in connection with her husbands will – and won..



In 1920 David applied for a new passport application because he and his wife wished to visit Cuba. He states on the form that he has lost the one from 1889. The form is shown on the left together with the photograph that he submitted showing him 30 years older than on the cabinet card.

I found the couple on passenger lists to: Le Havre, France in 1931 on *Lafayette*; Haifa, Israel in 1935 on *Conte di Savoia*; Yokohama, Japan in 1936 on *Empress of Asia* and Le Havre again in 1938 on *Normandie*, which in 1935 was the largest and fastest liner afloat with a fabulous Art Deco interior.

David Levy died in Miami in 1959 aged 92.

I have used these examples to show what information is now available to help trace the subjects of old photographs. Of course I have no connection to David W Levy and he has no claim to fame but I still found the research fascinating as each new relationship was revealed. Even finding out what the 'W' stood for was a revelation - 'Wolf'!