**[Victorian Science Spectacular](https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/victoriansciencespectacular/" \o "Victorian Science Spectacular)**

**Report**

**WHAT WE DID**

Our project aimed to a create a performance showcasing technologies of the 1890s; to perform it at two different venues; to reflect on what the experience of performance enabled us as historians to learn about Victorian shows; and to reflect on what we as humanities academics could learn about using material culture to engage modern audiences with issues about the role of technologies in shaping our imagined futures.

We held planning workshops in St Andrews (March 2013), Queen Mary University London (May 2013), and Cambridge (June 2013), and a reflective workshop in Birmingham (rearranged from Aberystwyth, November 2013). All the workshops involved the project’s academic participants (Dr Aileen Fyfe, Professor Iwan Rhys Morus, Dr Katy Price) and performance consultant (Timothy Cockerill), and several also involved critical friends from cognate disciplines (principally Dr Melanie Keene and Aileen Robinson). The unexpected medical unavailability of our magic lantern consultant meant that we had to acquire (and learn to use!) a lantern and slides of our own; and we would like to record our thanks to Richard Rigby and the [Magic Lantern Society](http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/) for assisting us.

[List of performances, July to November 2013](https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/victoriansciencespectacular/our-shows/)

We performed on more occasions than we had planned to: at first, this was because we needed the practice (!); later, it was because of the flattering interest shown by people who had seen or heard of our show, and invited us to come and perform somewhere else. We have since been approached by two festivals for 2014.

We are currently working on the academic outputs of the project, namely a special issue of the journal, *History of Science*, scheduled for 2016.

**OUR FINDINGS RE PUBLIC OUTREACH**

Audiences love to see historic equipment out of museum cases, and being used. Even though most of our demonstrations cannot have been particularly spectacular to 21st-century audiences, the fact that we were doing them with historic equipment was fascinating. For instance, they were impressed not by the actual sounds played by the phonograph, but by the fact that this mechanical device was able to play recorded sound at all.

Doing the show in costume and in character (as well as with historic equipment) helped to defamiliarise now-familiar phenomenon (such as recorded sound, and electric light) and assisted the audience in thinking historically. So did taking the time to explain the (unfamiliar) mechanism of the equipment (e.g. the phonograph).

Using historical artefacts was an incredibly successful way of getting audiences to relate from past to present, and to think about processes of technological change (Why did the Victorians do it that way? Why do we do it differently? How might we do it differently in the future?), and about consumer engagement with technologies (Who could afford to use this? What would they have used it for? How does that compare with the equivalent modern technology?). In the two sessions for school pupils, we purposefully engineered such discussion; in the public shows, it sometimes came up in the open discussion at the end, but was particularly notable after the formal close of the show, when we routinely had people coming forward to get up close to the historic equipment and ask more questions about it.

**LESSONS LEARNT**

We learned many things about the nature of performing with other people and with complex technological artefacts, in non-ideal venues, and to unknown audiences. This has been incredibly helpful to us in thinking through how Victorian scientific performers dealt with such issues, and has raised a number of new points (especially about practical logistics) for us to investigate in our future research. Although some of these points will no doubt seem obvious to seasoned performers, we do believe that experiencing them for ourselves has been highly educational for us.

The things we learned about performance include:

* It takes far longer to set up a show, and test the equipment, than one expects. Even when doing it for the seventh time.
* Especially when you do it in a different (and unknown) venue each time.
* Different venues require the show to work differently: instruments may have to go in different places; performers may have to move in different ways; audiences may or may not be able to see so well (consider a flat room versus a raked theatre).
* Choreography (and practice) matters. We knew this, but we understand it better having done it!
* A show like this involved a lot of stuff (from instruments to costumes to theatrical drapes); travelling by public transport became very difficult (and impossible for one of us).
* Servants would have been very useful!
* Audiences may seem demographically similar, but nonetheless respond in different ways to the same show. We need a more sophisticated vocabulary for describing audiences.

The questions raised for our future historical research include:

* How did Victorian performers transport all their kit around the country?
* What was the limit of complexity to a one-man travelling show?
* How much did they know in advance about the venues in which they would be performing?
* How did they manage audience expectations (e.g. through advance advertising)?
* What sort of engagement did they have with their audiences, either during the performance, or afterwards?
* How did they carry (or bank) the money received on the door?

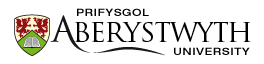
**FUTURE PLANS**

We have decided that we will not continue performing as a group, firstly because the logistics of collaboration in-person between participants based in St Andrews, Aberystwyth and London is too complicated; and secondly, because we feel that we have now learned about as much as we are going to learn from the experience of performing. Each new performance brings fewer new insights. We are currently reflecting on those insights, and preparing to write them up in a special issue of *History of Science* for publication in 2016.

The main reason to continue performing would be for public outreach; but we feel there are better ways of doing that, than bringing us together from the distant corners of the UK.

Instead, we intend to develop individual and local versions of the show, making use of the costumes and equipment we acquired and, if possible, working in collaboration with other groups or organisations. For example, Tim Cockerill will be re-using the chemistry demonstration he developed in his stage show; Aileen Fyfe is working with the Museum of the University of St Andrews to develop a handling collection and accompanying resources to be used in sessions with local school children; and Katy Price will be using the phonograph in her poetry performances.

14 March 2014

[](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/) [https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/victoriansciencespectacular/wp-content/themes/victscispec/images/st-andrews.gif](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/) [](http://www.aber.ac.uk/)[](http://www.qmul.ac.uk/)