

Recollections of a Senior Athenæum Member

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with Jo Power

It was in early September 1936 that I first entered the Athenæum building. This was the home of the Plymouth Institution and Natural History Society, as it was then known.

For quite a few years I had been interested in photography and I'd heard that the Athenæum housed a photographic section, so thought I would like to join. For many years I'd been walking past the Athenæum and had no idea what happened there, the building was rather imposing and never seemed to show much activity. Anyway, I ventured in and quietly took my place in the back row. The lecture hadn't quite started and as I looked about I could see plaster casts of the Elgin marbles along the top of the room. My general impression was of faded splendour.

My reception was quite friendly, despite my slight forebodings at entering such an august establishment, but as the lecture started of course I became interested, and it was clear that this was to be a long term relationship. In fact, although I didn't know it at the time, it was to last, on and off, for over 75 years, and continues at the time of writing.

I quickly made friends with a number of members who all had the common interest, were quite approachable, and generally talkative. Two in particular I became very acquainted with; one was Gerald Prior, who later became a professional photographer, and John Bowden, who worked at the Marine Biological Laboratories, where I made my first enlargement using their dark room.

After the lecture was over I introduced myself to the Secretary, and paid my subscription, in those days the full subscription to the Institution was one guinea, but you could join any one section for half a guinea, and this was reduced to seven shillings and sixpence for a Junior Member, which of course I was, (this was half a week's pay for me). The secretary introduced me to some of the members, took me into the Library and showed me the Amateur Photographer Magazine, which, as a member of the Photographic Section, I was entitled to read – this was a source of saving threepence a week to me which more than cancelled out the subscription! That was the start of a long and happy relationship.

For the record, some of the older members of the Photographic Section at that time were Messrs. W. Yandall (Secretary), D.P. Wilson of the Marine Biological Association, A. Crooke, an optician, Kirkwood, Quance Lamb, Prior and Bowden. Of the younger members I recall Messrs. Robins, Evans, Webb and Walker. These last two pals were dubbed by John Bowden "Ikoflex One and Two" owing to their preference for similar cameras!

The library also housed a museum. There were numerous glass fronted cases with all sorts of exhibits there, not that I took a lot of notice of them at that time, I was merely interested in the photographic side of things. There was also a dark room down in the depths of the building which had an ancient horizontal enlarger and which was only suitable for plate cameras. This had been converted to electricity and shone a very dim image of the negative on the easel, but it was no use to me. In any case, I soon made my own enlarger.

Upstairs there was a small room used as a Committee Room and a Caretaker's flat. We had a resident Caretaker – one Mr. Goslin, a rather lugubrious character. I remember him saying to me, "That Gerald Prior's been 'ere – Woodbine packets all over the place". Gerald, who used the Darkroom a lot, found this very amusing.

The meetings, with several demonstrations and talks, were a welcome break. (In a full week, as a Dockyard apprentice, we started at seven o'clock in the morning, for a five and a half day week which combined working in the mornings and some afternoons; and classes, two afternoons and three evenings a week, these finishing at half past seven or eight o'clock. Quite a long day for a 16 or 17 year old, I don't think it would be allowed these days).

As time went on it was decided to upgrade the dark room and I started making my acquaintance with Building and Maintenance in the Athenæum; I had become the Darkroom Steward by then and had constructed a bench in there. There was talk about getting a new enlarger, and after much discussion whether it should be 35 mm or larger, we ended up with a 2¼ square, 6 x 6 cm negative size enlarger which coped for most people in those days. This was enclosed in a cupboard with removable shelves which could be slid in various slots so you could quite easily make a 20" x 16" print if required. This was in about 1938 and meetings continued until the fateful days in March and April 1941 when we had the Blitz. This was disastrous for the Athenæum building which was badly damaged. I remember walking down Athenæum Street and looking down at the Athenæum. I could see the remains of the dark room, and there in the debris was the wreckage of the enlarger and the ashes of the cupboard we'd talked about so earnestly the years before. Walking around to the front and looking through the entrance door, one could see there was no roof, the plaster replicas of the Elgin marbles were still there but badly damaged and the floor was covered with debris, so that really was the end of the old Athenæum building sadly.

However, this was not the end of the Athenæum as an Institution. Activities continued in a building in Alexandra Road and went on until the new building was constructed in 1960 on the old site when, of course, all activities including the Photographic Section were reinstalled in the new building and continue to this day.

The new building is a very ingenious design incorporating many features not available in the old one. It is light and airy, well heated, and well decorated and maintained due to the efforts of members and staff. The old building with its long history would not have been able to meet today's requirements and therefore would have had to be extensively altered.