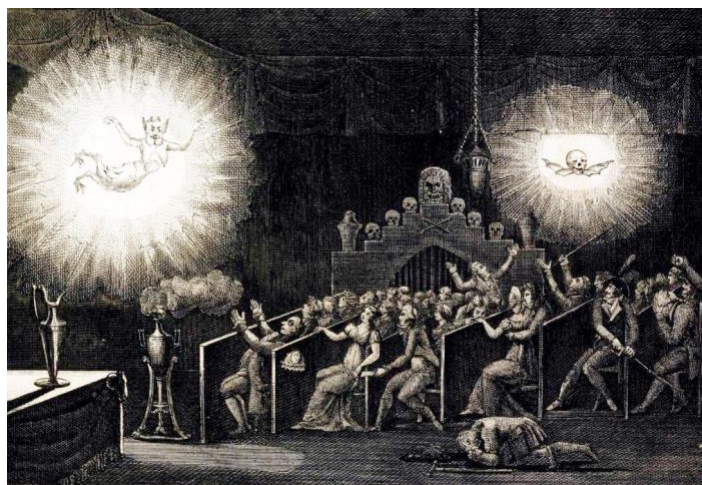# A Magic Lantern Phantasmagoria

Jim Horne brought his magic lantern to the November meeting of the Local History Group, and told us the story of how lanterns like his became such a popular medium in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It was in the mid-17th century that magic lanterns first appeared, created by the Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens and the Danish mathematician Thomas Rasmussen Walgensten. The idea was a success, and soon others were using mirrors to project the image around the room, and mounting their lanterns on rails to create an impression of movement.

By the late 18th century the showmen had taken over. They created clouds of smoke and projected ghostly moving images onto them. With suitable spooky noises added the audience was both thrilled and terrified: these horror shows were called 'phantasmagoria'.

Roberts Phantasmagoria 1797

A triple lantern of 1886

By the mid-19th century smoke and mirrors were out of fashion: the lantern became more of an educational tool, with biblical and moral themes more in evidence. Better sources of light were introduced, and lanterns became more sophisticated with two or three mounted together so that images could dissolve from one to the next.

On to the show!

Jim had put a modern light source into his lantern, so it projected well onto the big screen in the Methodist Church. He showed us a number of early 20th century slides of castles, piers, and people at the seaside. Then several visual jokes where part of the slide was first hidden then subsequently revealed to delight the audience.

The most memorable slides told nursery rhymes and pantomime stories. We saw Old Mother Hubbard, Aladdin and his Lamp, Jack and the Beanstalk and the Pied Piper of Hamelin, all in a series of colour slides with words and pictures. It was a fitting conclusion to an evening of entertainment in a style that our grandparents might have enjoyed when they were young.

Roger Berkeley