

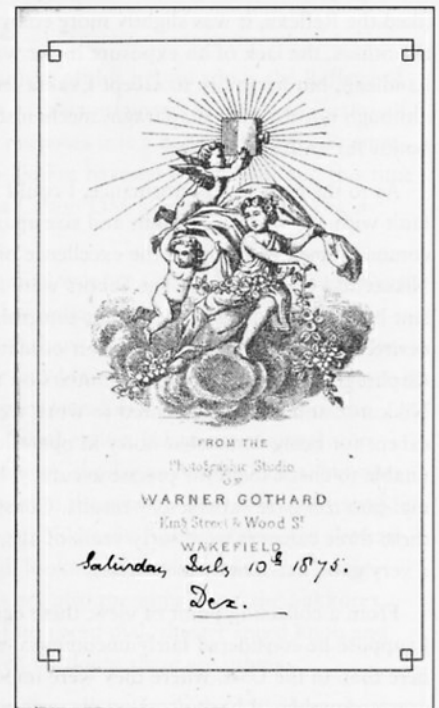
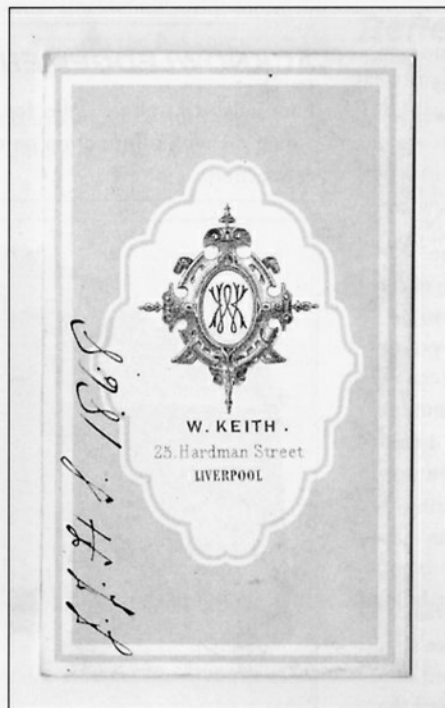
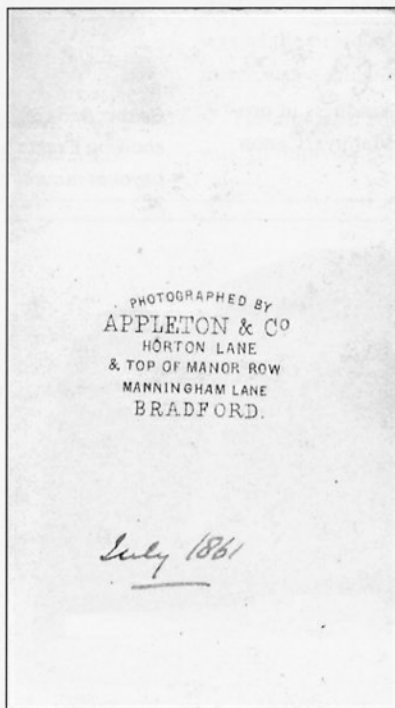
Cartomania:

When was that old picture taken?

By Ron Cosens

As we all know, dating is (or was) an important part of life! With a photograph, knowing the date of creation adds so much to the card's interest and use. For instance, if you know that a family photograph was taken in 1877 (see more below) in Birmingham (from the studio address) and that it is of a teenage girl (from the image) then it certainly narrows down which of your relatives it could be. Further cards from the same source will help to confirm your initial assumptions and, of course, a card with a sitter's name on it is fantastic. Here we look in more depth at how to date a Carte de Visite.

Below left: 1861 - CdV by Appleton & Co., Bradford. Simple back, printed in black. Square corners. Below centre: 1868 - CdV by W Keith, Liverpool. Scallop and border design. Printed in black and one colour. Square corners. Below right: 1875 - CdV by Warner Gothard, Wakefield. Cherub design (with camera) and border printed in red. Still using square corners.



FOR practical purposes, cartes de visite fall within the overall time span 1860 to 1905 although exceptions can be found a few years either side of this period. Cabinet cards were produced from 1866 to 1910 and beyond. Within these overall periods, dating a card can be determined by using a number of clues from the card itself. These include date, image, mount, serial number, address, medals, processes and patrons. Let's look at each type of clue in a little more detail.

Dated Cards

This is the star witness, although there are a few false trails to look out for. The best evidence comes from cards that have the date machine printed on them, especially if the photographer used pre-dated mounts in consecutive years as it is likely that unused stock would have been destroyed at the year end. Another sure thing is a date added by the photographer with his 'John Bull Printing Set' (See CdV by Adams & Stilliard 1883).

After that comes a manuscript date written in ink in a Victorian style of handwriting often following the words 'taken on ...' or similar. Pencilled dates are less convincing. However, beware of reference numbers that look like dates (e.g. 1837) and those that say, often indistinctly, b1865 (born) or d1903 (died). Also treat with suspicion anything written in 'Biro' as it must have been added much later!

Images

The image should be a super clue and usually is. However, the subject of fashion would take several volumes to do it justice and there are many books (and websites) already on the market that explain about clothes and hair styles in great detail - see the list at the end of this article. Some sources are very specific and specialise in men, women or children - even different social classes, town or country or particular activities like going to the seaside. Clothing styles can establish 'not before' dates BUT they are less indicative of 'not after' dates as fashions lingered, sometimes for many years - especially regarding men!

Topographical cards can sometimes be dated by the presence (or absence) of a particular building or by showing a building under construction. Studio set design and props also indicate dates but this, again, is a vast subject that deserves an article on its own.

Remember, because copying was very common (extras required, for remembrance etc.), the date of the mount may be many years later than that of the image pasted onto it. If images are taken out of an album, always link them together with a unique group reference and add the position in the album as well (i.e. G12/01, G12/02 etc.). This juxtaposition is essential to any future research.

Mounts - physical design

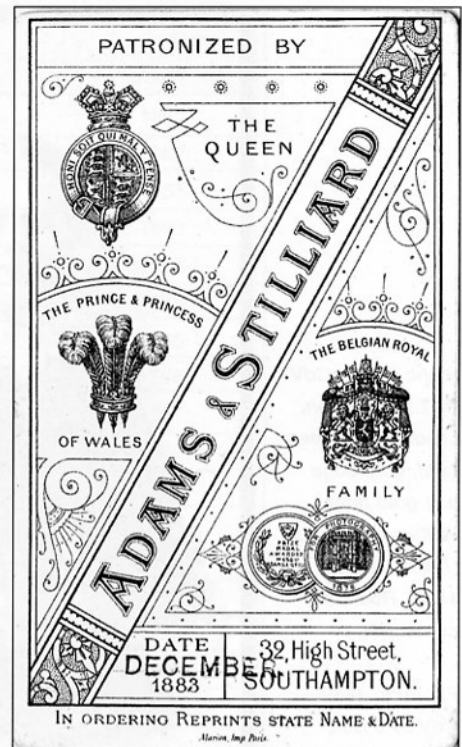
The mounts were standard stationery items, designed to fit the standard album apertures. They were produced by a limited range of suppliers and any changes in style were quickly plagiarised, so the mounts do provide a good guide to the date of a photograph. However, there must have been instances where stocks lasted for many years longer than expected and were out of fashion before they were used up.

Do look at David Hooper's excellent and innovative article on 'Dating British Portrait Cartes de Visite by Weight' (PW101, p 32) for details of mounts.

Generally speaking, cartes de visite changed from having square corners to having rounded corners, although square corners were re-introduced much later. They also changed from thin card to thicker card and then to coloured card. (See the Characteristics Chart and the illustrated cartes de visite). Early cabinet cards also started off with squared corners and were relatively lightweight.

Mounts - graphic design

For marketing purposes, graphic designs changed frequently and, although some were registered at the Stationers Hall, they were often copied illegally.



Graphic designs give an excellent guide to dating even though there must have been instances where stocks lasted longer than expected. Cartes de visite progressed from including plain typography to including simple border designs on the back. Later, graphic designs became very diverse with a whole range of artwork depicting medals, cameras, cherubs, buildings, Japanese-style urns and ferns etc.

Originally the printed name and town was on the front of the mount below the image, then it was put on the back as well as the front, and later (probably because of the introduction of cards of a darker colour) reverted to being only on the front again.

The print colour changed from black only to one colour only (e.g. red, blue) and then to multiple colours. When dark coloured mounts were introduced, the print colour changed, usually to gold or silver. (See the Characteristics Chart and the illustrated cartes de visite.)

Serial numbers

About 15% of photographers wrote reference (negative) numbers on their mounts to help themselves and their customers when subsequent copies were required (See CdV by J Bell 1889). These are invaluable for putting different mount designs from the same photographer into chronological order and, if any one design can be dated from another source, the serial number gives a good indication of date (or at least a 'not before' or a 'not after' date). Serial numbers also indicate annual throughput and this helps as well.

There is just one proviso, when copies were produced, the reference number of the original negative was usually written on the mount that was current at the time of the copy (i.e. a later design). This can be confusing.

Above left:
1879/80 (annotated BORN Feb 26th 1879 and picture is of a very young baby) - CdV by John Burton & Sons, Leicester and other locations (see Burton dating chart). Royal patronage and townscape with own studio included. Still using square corners.

Above right:
1883 - CdV by Adams & Stilliard, Southampton. Combined printed date and 'John Bull' date. With 3 patrons and awarded medal 1876. Rounded corners.

Right: 1885 – CdV by T D Nettleton, Leeds. Dark green card, gold edge and gold print. Written on reverse 'Taken October 1885'. Rounded corners.

Far right: 1889 – CdV by J Bell, Frome. 'Birds with Bamboo' design. Reference No. included. Rounded corners.



Below: 1892 – CdV by Auty & Ruddock, Tynemouth. Typical 'Artist at Easel' design. Many dated medals up to 1888. Photo is of an elderly lady, Miss Fraser, 4 Victoria Avenue, Whitley, Nr. Newcastle. Real hard evidence for family historians.

Addresses

Many Victorian photographers frequently moved, or opened extra studios, as they exploited opportunities for business expansion. As all studio addresses were quoted on mounts, it is often easy to determine 'not before' or 'not after' dates. This becomes more precise when several studios are listed simultaneously as there was a pattern of growth in the early years and retrenchment from the 1880s onwards (See CdV by John Burton & Sons (1879/80) and the JB dating chart).

Many address lists exist of photographers in different parts of the UK and overseas. Those in the UK have been compiled mainly from Trade Directories and a useful series is available from the RPS. Also,

Michael Pritchard's list of London photographers is superb and there are several very helpful websites including Peter Stubbs' very comprehensive treatise on Edinburgh photography at <http://www.edinphoto.org.uk>.

Medals

Winning has always been something to be proud of so, when photographers were awarded medals, they loved to illustrate them on their cards - often including the date of the award! As more medals were won, more were illustrated so that if two medals were illustrated with the last one dated 1887 and three were illustrated with the last one dated 1889, the first design must have been used between 1887 and 1889 and the second design cannot be before 1889 (unless the photographer doubled as a clairvoyant). (See cartes de visite by Adams & Stilliard 1883 and Auty & Ruddock 1892).

Processes

Most cards included ordinary albumen prints but other processes were used such as autotypes, chromotypes, carbon prints, platinotypes and, for mass produced items - Woodburytypes. These processes, and other minor ones, can identify a 'not before' date.

Patrons

Photographers liked to boast about the distinguished people that patronised them. It is interesting to see



how some start off with 'Distinguished' patrons, progress to the 'Royal Family' and peak with Queen Victoria herself (and then the late QV...)! Each step up is a clue to chronological order and, with other info, to the actual image date (See CdV by Adams & Stilliard 1883). However, so many photographers claimed to be patronised by the Queen that by the mid 1880s they had to obtain a Special Royal Warrant before they could use her name - another dating clue!

So how do we decide on a date?

There is no substitute for seeing and handling a photograph (carefully of course). No words can describe accurately what 'feels right' and what is 'not quite right'. I tend to work down the following list, checking for genuineness at each stage.

- Is there a date and does it look genuine?
- What does the actual image indicate (fashion/ props etc.)?
- Is the card thin/ thick, are the corners square/ rounded, is the mount white/ green/ brown/ cream?
- Is the graphic design plain or fancy (medals/ cameras/ cherubs/ Japanese etc.)?
- Is the print black/ single colour/ multiple colours?
- Is the print on the front only/ on the back and the front/ on the back only and later (with heavy or coloured card) on the front only?

All these give a rough date which can be more closely defined by reference to the medals, the reference numbers and the address lists (which give information like 'at 12 High Street from 1876-1879').

So there we have it - a quick overview, although there are many other minor clues available to someone with lots of data. If you have a Granny that needs dating, do get in touch as I am always happy to help! Contact me at ron.cosens@btinternet.com, tel. 01751 477790, www.victorianimagecollection.com

P.S. Thanks to all those who contacted me about studio locations after the last article.

Characteristics Chart	Earliest Example
Blue print	1860
Green print	1862
Maroon print	1863
Cherubs	1863
Borders and/or scallops	1865
Medals	1865
Palette & brushes	1865
Palette, brushes & camera	1866
Buildings - townscape	1867
Rounded corners	1869
Dated - John Bull style	1871
Buildings - studio	1871
Patrons	1871
Gold print	1873
Brown card	1876
Date - pre printed	1876
Gold edges	1880
Grey card	1879?
Two colour print (not black)	1880
Chromotype	1880
Birds - with bamboo	1881
Japanese parasol - with flower bush	1883
Green (dark) card	1884
Red card	1887
Trellis	1888
Ivory cards	1889
Square corners (again)	1899
Without 4 straight edges	1901

Some useful books on Victorian fashion.

1. Fashion a la Carte 1860 - 1900 - by Avril Lansdell. 1985 Shire Publications ISBN 0 85263 747 0
2. Dating Old Photographs by Robert Pols. 1995. Federation of Family History Societies (Publications)

John Burton & Sons - simplified dating chart	Established late 1850's														
Company Style Reference >>	10	11	20	30	40	40c	50	51	52	60	61	70	80	90	91
Dated Cards >>				'64					'73	'79	'84	'88?			1900
Town and/or Address															
Leicester, Haymarket	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Birmingham	x	x	x	x											
Derby		x	x	x	x	x									
Burton upon Trent, High Street			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					
Nottingham				x	x	x	x	x							
Melton Mowbray, Market Place						x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Oakham, Ashwell Road									x	x	x	x			
And Branches													x		
Profile of information taken from carte de visite and/or cabinet photographs.															