

# Could you date this woman?

The story of a research project

By Ron Cosens

*Would you want to? Well, many people would. I get many emails each and every week via the website asking for information on when a particular photographer was in business. What the enquirer really wants to know is the date of the family portrait that they have before them.*

WHY? BECAUSE NO ONE in the past bothered to write the sitter's name on the photograph and they don't know who the sitter is. They do know it is someone from the family AND they know where it was taken as the photographer's name, and even the photographer's address, is usually on the photo mount BUT they don't know the date.

Is it Great Grandmother or Great Great Grandmother or is it someone else in the family tree?

Of course, photographs with more than one person in them are more helpful - mother, father and four children (one boy and three younger girls, say) are always a good clue. Or photographs of weddings or other family gatherings help to pinpoint a date. However, in reality, over 95% of photographs are of one person.

Dating cartes de visite and cabinet cards was taking up a lot of my time - too much - so ... What was the answer?

Some people try to date photographs by looking at the fashions and this, indeed, is a very valid approach, especially as it can often establish a 'not before' date as it is known when certain fashions were introduced.

However, it does require the subjects to be fairly 'in fashion' and this is not always the case with men, especially older men, people who live away from the bigger towns and cities and many poorer people, wherever they were living.

There is another approach which is very reliable. There is so much commonality in the design of the carte de visite and cabinet card mounts that an analysis of over 10,000 DATED examples quickly established that most aspects of mount design were transient, often being in use for a very limited period.

Where the term carte de visite is used in this article it also includes the carte de visite's bigger brother, the cabinet card.

## A project was born

Was it possible, by analysing as many identifiable aspects of mount design as possible, to allocate date ranges and hence a final date for the photograph? YES.

The first thing was to list all of the more common 'Aspects' and they quickly fell into four main areas; (1) the physical properties of the card mount (shape, size, colour etc.) (2) the



*Old lady - This lady could, maybe, be dated from the clothes she was wearing but the photo mount (front and back) provides an alternative way to accurately determine the date of the photo*

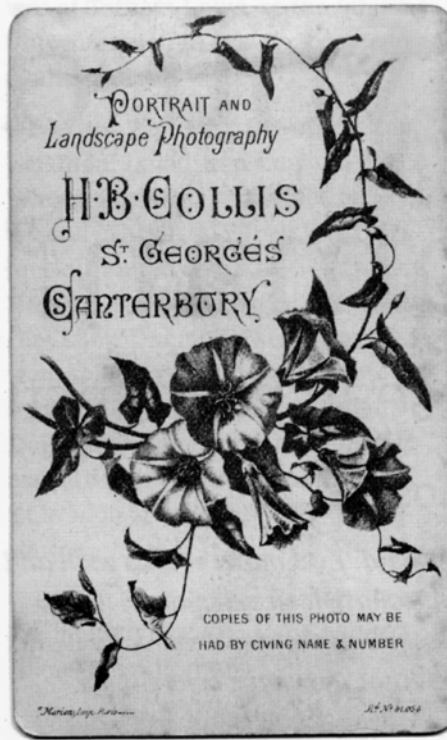
general information added to the mount by the printer (colour of print, printer's marks, names of patrons etc.) (3) the design themes (birds, cameras, lions, crowns etc.) and (4) very specific designs such as the "Morning Glory" shown on the next page.

It also became clear at an early stage that the time ranges for (1) and (2) tended to be rather wider than the time ranges for (3) which themselves were rather wider than the time ranges for (4) so the most useful aspects of all fell into the last category.

Luckily, many card mounts were produced by national printers who developed designs and sent their salesmen around the country to sell them. The salesman would sell the photographer a particular design and then customise it (see the "Morning



Above left: Collis CdV blank. The printer's travelling rep. would offer the photographer a generic design and arrange for it to be customised.



Above right: Collis CdV. Mr Collis' cdv mount after customisation

Glory", customised for Collis) with the photographer's name, address and other marketing information such as the patrons they had or the medals they had won for their photographic prowess. [fig03] The good news is that the salesmen visited fairly frequently and encouraged the photographers to buy the latest designs - in that way most designs were in use for just a few years. The designs were also in use nationwide so that a dated example from Brighton and a dated example from York accurately represent the dates that the design was in use in, for instance, Bristol and Manchester as well.

Some designs were devised and printed locally so, in those cases, other aspects of the card mount become more important.

By taking about 100 cards it quickly became obvious which aspects needed to be analysed. As it turned out, the initial list was fairly complete with only a couple of aspects being added at a later date.

## Project objectives

As with any research or development project, it was important that the objectives were clear at the outset. The objectives were to:-

- Develop a DIY computer system that would enable users to date their own family portraits on cartes de visite and cabinet cards.
- Provide accuracy to within nine years (half a generation).
- Ensure the system could be used accurately by people who were not necessarily familiar with old photographs.
- Ensure the system would be simple but also fun or interesting or educational (or even all three) to encourage people to use it more than once.
- Put in place a fall back mechanism for dealing with cards that the DIY system could not cope with adequately.
- Ensure that all research data was

securely protected to prevent it from being copied or lost.

- Record procedures for future research and for data maintenance.
- Allow additional data to be integrated easily in the future.

Whilst carrying out the project it was important that:-

- A paper based prototype was developed using a sufficient sample to ensure that the logic was sound and, above all, the end results were always accurate.
- A computer based wizard was developed to ensure the software worked.
- Full and accurate data were recorded, kept safe and backed up.

All data were encrypted to prevent plagiarism.

## The 'Aspects'

After studying sufficient photographs, a list of aspects related to the physical properties of the card mounts was drawn up as follows:-

- Mount size
- Mount shape
- Card colour
- Edge colour
- Tissues added to protect the image.

Aspects regarding the general information added to the mount by the printer included:-

- Text colour
- Text position (e.g. on the back, front or back & front)
- Printer's marks
- Patrons.

The specific design themes included such things as:-

- Belts & buckles
- Crowns
- Lions rampant

- Artists palettes
- Ribbons, banners and panels

And the very specific designs included:-

- Classical ladies
- Birds
- Cherubs
- Plants
- Cameras etc.

Each aspect was given a code and description for easy reference. This turned out to be invaluable whilst the computer system was being built and as the text and images were added and, in some cases, were subsequently amended.

## Collecting the data

Collecting the data entailed looking through, in most cases, all ten thousand dated cartes de visite for EACH aspect. As there are over 50 aspects or sub-aspects that meant up to 500,000 inspections of the carte de visite collection.

Each aspect had anything from three to thirty sub-aspects. For instance 'Card Colour' had to be broken down into white, red, blue, light green,

dark green, buff, brown etc. etc. whilst 'Printer's Marks' was divided into Marion & Co, Osborne, Trapp & Munch and many others, whilst Marion & Co was further broken down into over 25 different formats that the name was printed in. Each example of each aspect and sub-aspect was logged against the dates of the DATED cartes de visite and a date range established.

The date ranges were then compared to many undated cartes de visite of the same design and the dates verified against trade directory information.

It was a long and tedious process so it was split up between four people, a decision which necessitated clear definitions and good monitoring to ensure consistent and accurate results. Effective monitoring could only be achieved by the same person being present at all times. Data was collected and then transcribed onto Excel spreadsheets to facilitate analysis and to enable further information to be added easily in the future.

For each sub-aspect it was necessary to look at the pattern of dates recorded and to allocate date ranges for

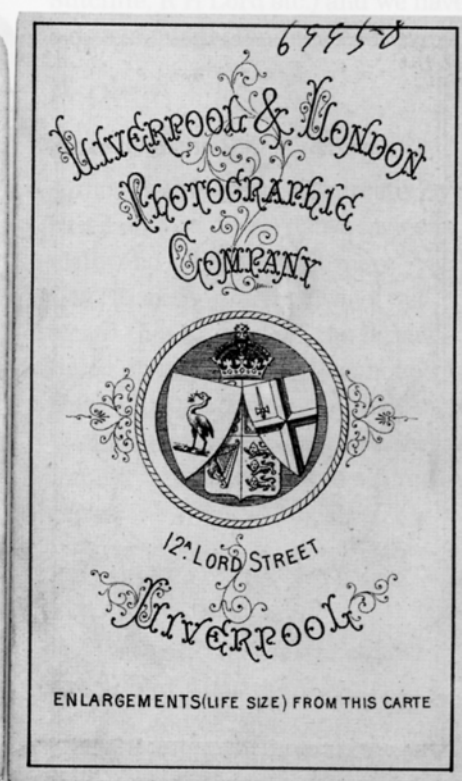
each. Where a date range exceeded nine years, further analysis was carried out to see if the sub-aspect could be split again into sub-sub-aspects.

The key thing that had to be borne in mind at all times when collecting data and allocating aspects was whether or not a member of the public (not a carte de visite enthusiast) could clearly recognise the difference between one aspect and another. One person's buff is another person's light brown or another person's cream. Colours are further complicated by the fact that computer screens are not consistent in the way they display them and of course some people are colour blind. Regrettably, even the Wizard cannot accommodate colour blind people.

## How does the Wizard work?

The Wizard is a computer programme available on the internet.

Each carte de visite mount has all, or nearly all, of the aspects which have been built into the computer system. There are seven basic aspects (e.g. Shape, Size, Colour etc.) for all mounts and a further two basic aspects which are usually applicable



(i.e. Printers and Patrons); but in some cases are not. Each aspect has a researched date range attached to it.

A simple (truncated) example can explain the logic of how the Wizard works.

- Aspect A available only between 1860-1910
- Aspect B available only between 1875-1905
- Aspect C available only between 1870-1883

Therefore, ALL THREE aspects can only be available SIMULTANEOUSLY between 1875 and 1883. The mount, and by implication, the image must also have been produced between those dates. The only exception to this implication is when an earlier photograph is copied by a professional photographer and pasted onto his/her current mount at a later date. In reality, the number of copies of family portraits (i.e. not of famous people, views etc.) is minimal and accounts for less than 1% of all cartes de visite produced.

Once all of the basic aspects have been selected, the user is invited to look at images of design themes or,

even better, specific designs and select from one of the many images in the system. Each image selected has a date range attached to it and this is collated with the basic summary calculation to provide a final answer - 'The date of your photograph'.

The first use of the Wizard takes about 4 - 5 minutes and subsequent uses are, of course, quicker.

## Checks and balances

Many people know that, in reality, cartes de visite were never produced on thick, dark green card as early as the 1860s or 1870s.

To cut out these mistakes at an early stage, there are various check points in the computer system to help the user.

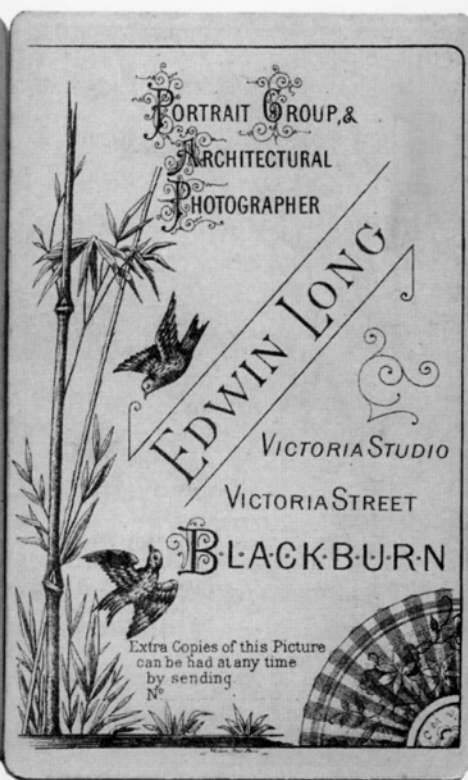
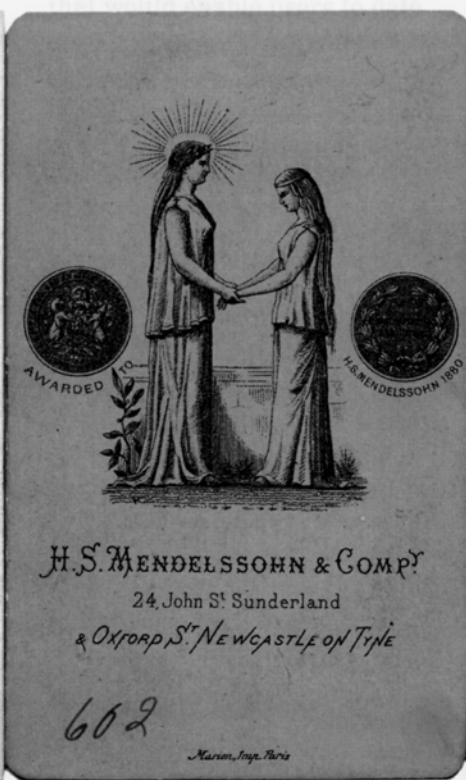
For instance, after making the selections in the basic aspect section, the computer calculates a provisional date - although it does not display it. If the date is invalid - i.e. there is no common date range - the user is notified and invited to start again. This can happen when a wrong or invalid selection is made. In the example below, there is no common time band

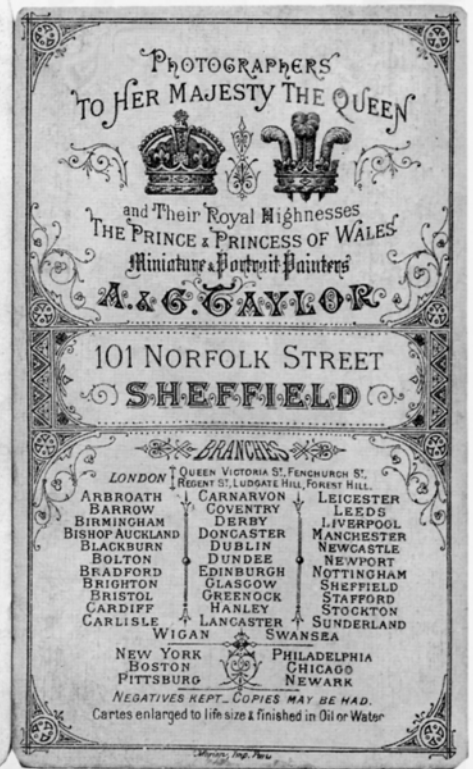
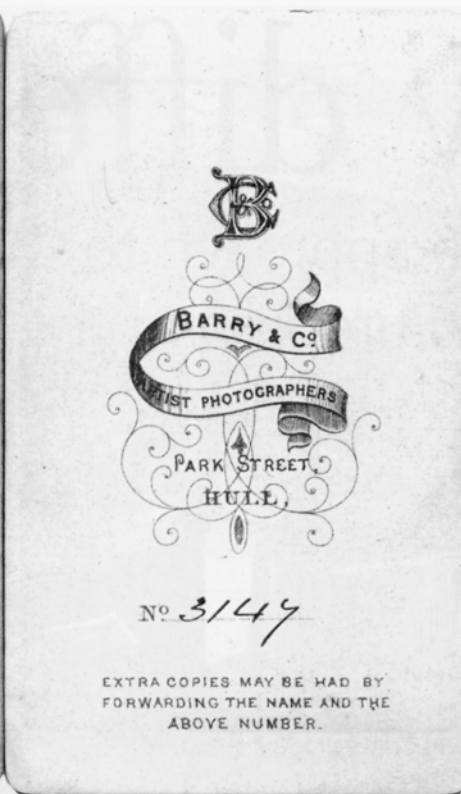
that exists for ALL of the selections simultaneously.

- Aspect A available only between 1860-1910
- Aspect B available only between 1875-1905
- Aspect C available only between 1870-1883
- Aspect D available only between 1888-1897

There is a further backup procedure for ensuring satisfaction. The date range will always be accurate but if, when the final date range of the photograph is displayed, it exceeds nine years the user is invited to submit scans of the photograph and it will be dated using further sources of information such as that from trade directories and other historical advertisements.

Part of this back up procedure also uses a facility built into the computer system itself which has been developed so that the administrator (i.e. not the user) can interrogate it using the unique reference number allocated to each usage. For every use of the Wizard an automated email is sent to





a secure gmail account which identifies all of the selections made by the user. This enables the administrator to see if the user has made any obvious selection errors. If the errors are unusual, they can be sorted out with the user on a one-off basis. If the selection errors start to form a pattern, it indicates that the wording or the images in the Wizard may be less than clear. If so, they can be rectified and the system made better for the future - the principle of 'Continuous Improvement'.

And if the result is still inconclusive, the image is referred to a qualified and well published expert on fashion who dates images from the sitter's clothes, hairstyle etc.

### How is the Wizard used?

Very easily - have your carte de visite in your hand, start the Wizard, make your selections and have fun. If you want to see the date of your photograph, use PayPal and get the result.

If the result is more than nine years, send a scanned copy by email.

Simple!!

### Further Research - phase 2 et al

Research is never finished - so - the records and the Wizard system have been set up so that all new information can be assessed and, if appropriate, integrated to enable further expansion and even greater accuracy.

The Wizard already includes a comprehensive dating section for A & G Taylor, the 'Biggest Photographers in the World' and, whilst the Wizard dates the photographs of the following firms accurately, even greater accuracy can be attained with further investigation.

Therefore, the plan over the next six months is to research the next two biggest firms, Brown, Barnes & Bell and then Hellis & Sons. After that there is a substantial list of other high volume firms such as Hills & Saunders, Elliott & Fry, Debenham, Williams & Williams of Wales and the border counties, Horace Dudley of the Midlands, London School of Photography, London Stereo Co., William Heath of Plymouth, John Hawke also of Plymouth, Robert

Banks of Manchester, H J Whitlock of Birmingham and R L Graham of Leamington Spa to name a few!!

Add to this a list of photographers who won lots of medals and made dating their photographs a bit easier by displaying the medals on their photo mounts (H P Robinson, F M Sutcliffe, R H Lord etc.) and we have a development plan to last for years!

### A plea

Research relies on evidence.

Although this project is already based on over 10,000 dated cartes de visite and cabinet cards, more DATED examples are always welcome - that extra bit in the jigsaw. Dated photographs by the photographers named above, or by any other Victorian photographers, are always wanted - originals or even scanned copies.

### Still want to date me ?

If so, go to

[www.cartedevisite.co.uk](http://www.cartedevisite.co.uk)

and 'Click the Wizard',

or contact Ron Cosens at

[ron.cosens@btinternet.com](mailto:ron.cosens@btinternet.com)