

Stereoscope

Roy Fletcher

At Bishop's Stortford Museum we have in our collection an ornate wooden stereoscope. A stereoscope is a device for viewing a card with two images – known as a stereocard. Both images are of the same subject but taken at slightly different positions. Thus, when viewed together through the stereoscope, they create a single image with three dimensional depth and solidarity. The distance moved by the photographer from taking the first image to the second is roughly the same distance between the viewer's eyes.



According to research sources, the first stereoscope was invented by Charles Wheatstone and was shown to the public in 1838. Using mirrors it was a way to demonstrate how binocular vision worked.

A rival to Wheatstone was a gentleman called David Brewster. He designed a wooden box to view drawn landscape transparencies. Popular photography, of course, had still had not been invented at this stage.

We then move to 1861 when Oliver Holmes created a simple, lightweight, handheld device with two magnifying lenses, a wooden stand to hold the stereocards in front of them, and a handle to hold the contraption to your face.

The availability of the stereoscope in the nineteenth century was like the arrival of television in the twentieth: It was an exciting new form of entertainment, at least for the middle classes who could afford such things. For those less fortunate there was the opportunity to see this new wonder at travelling fairs for the price of a penny or two. By today's standard it would appear to be something to quickly tire of once you had viewed the cards.

The advent of the cinema, with access by a wider audience, was the beginning of the end for the stereoscope. However, all was not totally finished as in the mid-twentieth century there appeared a product called a "Viewmaster": it had a plastic body into which was inserted a cardboard disc containing a number of image pairs. Rotation was achieved by a trigger at the side of the body.

The stereoscope in the Museum's collection is not as useful as the Holmes' model. It is not handheld but was designed to sit on a table or similar flat surface. However, an advantage over the Holmes version is that the back panel that holds the cards can be adjusted to improve image focus.

In addition to the Stereoscope we have a number of stereocards: all can be seen at Bishop's Stortford Museum.

Researched and written by Roy Fletcher.

Roy has been a volunteer at the museum for six years, spending his time cataloguing the museum's collection. Roy has an interest in the local history, particularly the last 200 years.