

Henry West, 1825 - 1899
microphotograph slide maker "H.W."

by Brian Stevenson and Steve Gill

During the mid-1800s, the evolving technologies of microscopy and photography gave rise to "microphotographs", miniature photographs on glass slides that can be seen clearly only through a microscope. While John Benjamin Dancer is the most famous of these microphotographers, a considerable number of other professionals and amateurs tried their hands at the art. For a reason that is unclear, the vast majority of microphotograph makers put only their initials on the slides, rather than their full names. That slides labeled "J.B.D." were made by Dancer has long been accepted. Only recently, Stanley Warren's insightful scholarship led to the conclusion that "A.R." was Alfred Reeves, and both "J.S." and "J.C.S." were John Charles Stovin. Previously, "J.S." was assumed to be Joseph Sidebotham, based on the circumstantial evidence that Sidebotham was a colleague of Dancer's.

A microphotograph maker with initials "H.W." produced a series of at least 131 different pictures. None of the photographs depicted on the known "H.W." slides are identical to those of Dancer or other microphotographers. That fact would suggest that "H.W." did not merely re-label others' work, but was a legitimate photographer and microscopist in his/her own right.

Over the past several decades, several publications have attributed the "H.W." microphotographs to Herbert Watkins (1828-1916). However, no known publication cited a primary source for linking Watkins and "H.W.". Herbert Watkins was a relatively well-known portrait photographer of the Victorian era. He produced small photographs for cartes-de-visite and other cards, many of which were distributed by Marion & Co. However, a contemporary description of Watkins' miniature photographic cards indicates that they were approximately 1/4 inch (1 cm) in diameter and were neither mounted on slides nor true microphotographs that required a microscope: "*Messrs. Marion are now carrying on a business in the production of photographic visiting cards. The visitor who calls in your absence leaves not only his name, but his portrait, - which is sometimes a card of recommendation as well as an address. These portraits are brought within the compass of a circle that might go upon a finger ring, but telling under the microscope like a vigorous portrait by Titian. We have seen a picture of the Leviathan alias Great Eastern, executed on a speck which was in itself almost invisible, the picture itself being discoverable only by the microscope; but in the case of these cards, the picture, from the powerful machinery of a Herbert Watkins, is a great work of art; and the visitor munificently distributes portraits of himself by a great master.*" (*The Spectator*, 1858). Thus, there is no firm evidence to support Herbert Watkins as a producer of microphotograph slides.

Another publication from 1858 indicates that another photographer with initials H.W. was definitely producing commercial quantities of microphotograph slides. In conjunction with extant "H.W." microphotograph slides, it can be concluded that "H.W." was actually Henry West, a son of noted microscope maker Francis West. The January, 1858 issue of *Blackwood's Lady's Magazine and Gazette of the Fashionable World* reported:

"Science and Art. — Miniature photographs applicable to the microscope. — A delightful novelty both for the lover of art, the antiquarian, and the public generally. We have been favoured with a sight of a great variety of these miniature photographic portraits, scenery, &c, at Mr. H. West's, Optician, 41, Strand. Mr. West is a practical man, and has brought out all the most recherché subjects from the Dresden Gallery, after the first and admired masters, both ancient and modern. Also portraits from life, of General Sir Colin Campbell, Lord Palmerston, &c. These photographs are on small slips of glass, so small indeed, that there is nothing discernible to the naked eye but a small speck ; these being placed under an ordinary microscope, bring to view either a portrait like the life, or scenery after nature. Mr. H. West, the celebrated optician, has devoted much time and perseverance in the perfect production of this desired object, and brought it to the highest perfection, and has already on stock such a collection that must suit the most fastidious of curiosity hunters."



Figure 1. Microphotograph number 6, "Lot and His Daughters". The label on the right describes Henry West as being a "microscopic photographist". Further connecting West to this slide, the 1858 'Blackwood's Lady's Magazine and Gazette of the Fashionable World' stressed that West produced microphotographs of paintings from the Dresden Gallery.



Figure 2. Lord Palmerston, photograph number 31. The Prime Minister was noted by 'Blackwood's Lady's Magazine and Gazette of the Fashionable World' as being a subject of microphotographic slides made by Henry West. The original photograph was taken by J.J.E. Mayall. J.B. Dancer's microphotograph number 74 was produced from the same Mayall photograph, although Dancer's image shows all of Palmerston's body. This picture is distinct from the famous photograph of Lord Palmerston issued by Herbert Watkins (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A further argument against “H.W.” having been Herbert Watkins: the famed photograph of Lord Palmerston taken by Watkins in 1857. It is impossible to believe that Watkins would have made a microphotograph using a picture by John Mayall instead of his own production. Image used by permission of the National Portrait Gallery, for educational, not-for-profit purposes.



Figure 4. Microphotograph number 8, “The Tribute Money” by Titian, from a painting in the Dresden Gallery.



Figure 5. Two additional microphotograph slides by Henry West: *The Lord's Prayer* (slide number 27) and *Tablet to the Officers of H.M. 90th Light Infantry Perthshire Volunteers* (slide number 95).

Henry West was born June 8, 1825 in Middlesex (London area), the fourth child and third son of Francis and Mary West. Francis West (ca. 1789–1867) was a well-regarded maker of microscopes and other optical instruments. He operated from several locations throughout London, on occasions operating two or more shops simultaneously. He was variously reported to sell from 39 Southampton Street, 31 Cockspur Street, 41 Strand and 83, 92 and 93 Fleet Street. Henry's two brothers, John George West (1819-1873) and Francis Linsell West (1820-1884) were also noted manufacturers of optical instruments. John took on the operation at 92-93 Strand, while Francis took over the 31 Cockspur Street location. Henry worked at the 41 Strand shop, probably as an employee of his father, until just before his father's death. The September 20, 1856 *Lancet* listed 41 Strand as being the business of "West, Fras., and Co."

The first country-wide census of England, taken in 1841, listed Francis West and his family as living at 83 Fleet Street. Fifteen year-old Henry was recorded as being an "apprentice optician". At that time, West operated shops at both 83 Fleet Street and 41 Strand.

Henry West married Jane Maria Baggs on January 23, 1850. The Chelsea St. Luke's parish records listed both of their addresses as 13 College Street. It was quite common for both parties to state the intended marital home as their address, or state a family address in the same parish as that where Banns were being read.

The 1851 census recorded Henry and Jane as living at 41 Strand. Henry's parents and siblings lived elsewhere. They were still living there in 1861, along with their 6 children, a nursemaid and a housemaid.

As were many other manufacturers of optical instruments of the time, the Wests involved themselves with the new phenomenon of photography. By 1854, Henry's shop at 41 Strand was taking personal photographs, selling chemicals, paper and other apparatus, as well as offering

instructions (Figure 6).

PHOTOGRAPHY. — WEST & CO., Photographic Portrait Rooms, 41, Strand, opposite the Lowther Arcade, near Charing Cross.
Portrait in Case from 6s. 6d.
Set of Apparatus, with Practical Instruction, for 5l. 10s.
Paper, Chemical, of the best and lowest price.

Figure 6. Advertisement from the August 26, 1854 issue of 'Notes and Queries'.

MR. WEST'S PHOTOGRAPHIC ESTABLISHMENT, 41, Strand.—To those persons who may be leaving their friends, we would gently hint that portraits are taken by Mr. West in a very superior tint of photography. We have seen several highly-finished specimens, which we consider first style of the art, and seem to give general satisfaction to all parties. The price is such as to be within the reach of every one.

Figure 7. Advertisement for the novelty cartes-de-visite (CDVs), from 'Blackwood's Lady's Magazine', 1857.

As noted above, by 1858 Henry West was producing microphotograph slides from his shop at 41 Strand.

"Opticians" and "Makers of Philosophical Instruments" such as Henry West often manufactured a wide variety of optical and scientific apparatus. Among other things, Henry made sundials, and earned the title of "Optician and Sundial Maker to the Queen", (Figure 8).

A SUNDIAL, like this, is placed on the Terrace of the Crystal Palace; it shows the time at eight different parts of the world at one sight, and also at the spot where it is placed.
Made by H. WEST, Optician and Sundial maker to the Queen, 41, Strand, opposite the Lowther Arcade.



Figure 8. From the 1860 'Official General Guide to the Crystal Palace and Park'.

René Dagron adapted the simple Stanhope lens for service as a microphotograph magnifier. He popularized the mounting of a Stanhope lens and a microphotograph into a small charm of ivory, silver or other material. A person would peep through a tiny aperture and see the magnified photograph. Henry West jumped on that bandwagon and similarly produced "Stanhopes" (Figure 9).

MICROSCOPIO MINIATURE PORTRAITS
TAKEN from LIFE, carte de visite, or any other kind of portrait or engraving, and mounted to be worn in the form of small operas as charms, at 7s. 6d. ; extra copies, 3s. each.—At H. WEST'S photographic studio, 41, Strand, opposite the Lowther-arcade.

Figure 9. Advertisement for Stanhope microphotographs, from the April 10, 1863 'Times' (London).

Henry West was elected to membership in the Quekett Microscopical Club on July 7, 1865. He retained membership through 1869.

West relocated his shop in the spring of 1866, from 41 Strand to 3 Coventry Street (Figure 10). The business name, “*H. West and Company*”, suggests that Henry’s father was still a partner at the time. Francis West died the following year. The 1868 and 1869 membership roles of the Quekett Microscopical Club gave Henry West’s address as 41 Strand, suggesting that he retained some sort of business or abode at that location. Alternatively, he may have not bothered to update the club roster.

NOTICE of REMOVAL.—H. WEST and CO.,
Opticians to the Admiralty, 41, Strand, have
OPENED their NEW PREMISES at 3, Coventry-
street, Haymarket, with a New Stock of the finest
quality of spectacles, field glasses; also every de-
scription of mathematical instruments.

Figure 10. Advertisement from ‘The Owl’, April 25, 1866. This indicates that West produced a variety of optical and other scientific instruments.



Figure 11. A “Society of Arts Prize”-style microscope, by Henry West. The addresses date this instrument to ca. 1866, when West moved from 41 Strand to 3 Coventry Street. Screenshots from an internet auction, adapted for educational, non-profit purposes.

Henry’s wife, Jane, died during the 1860s. She was probably the 38 year-old woman of that name who was buried September 5, 1867 at the St. Pancras St. James parish church. Her address at the time of death was Coventry Street, Haymarket.

The 1871 census placed Henry West living at 98 Strand. Voter registration records indicate he remained at that site through at least 1878. This was also, at some time, a business location (Figure 12). Court records show that West operated a shop in the Coventry Street area during the autumn of 1870, although he had moved a short distance to Rupert Street. The Old Bailey records also give further information on the types of instruments that Henry West made and sold:

“Old Court - Monday, April 3rd, 1871.

James Pearce, was indicted for feloniously breaking and entering the shop of Solomon Zucher, and stealing therein.

Henry West (testimony). I am an optician, of 98, Strand - in October last my shop at 4, Rupert Street, Haymarket, was entered, and I lost a number of articles - I find here some of the property I then lost; a little compass, a log glass, brass compasses, and a small barometer.

Cross-examined. I have known the prisoner twenty-three or twenty-four years—I have always looked upon him as a thoroughly respectable man, and the last man I should suppose would receive stolen goods.”

and

“Moss Benjamin was again indicted, with Nathan Benjamin, for burglariously breaking and entering the shop of William Ford Stanley, and stealing 25 opera glasses and other goods.

Henry West (testimony). I am an optician, at 98, Strand - I have a shop in Rupert Street - on 28th October, that shop was broken into, and I missed among other things, this telescope - I had had it about twenty years in stock - I made half a dozen of them - I had three in stock at my own shop, and there were three at my brother's in Fleet Street - the name is on them.”

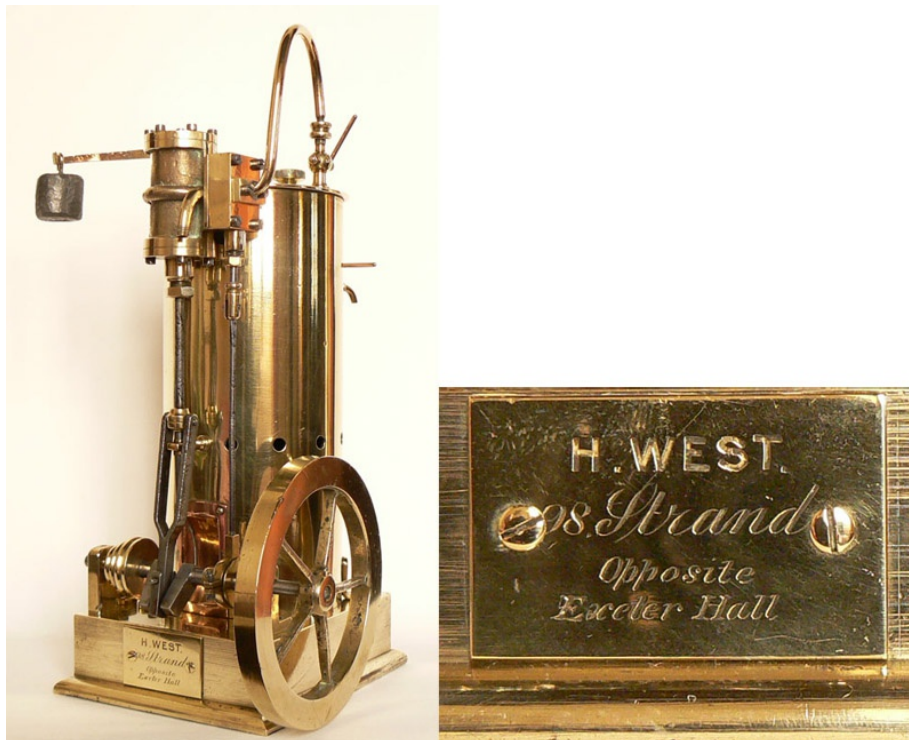


Figure 12. A steam engine made by Henry West at the time he operated a business from 98 Strand (ca. 1870-1879). Adapted from http://le.compendium.pagesperso-orange.fr/moteur_a_vapeur.htm, for educational, not-for-profit purposes.

Henry West moved his home and business across the Thames River, to Lambeth, in approximately 1880. The 1880 *Kelly's Directory of the Watch and Clock Trades* give his address as 73 Upper Kennington Lane. The 1879 *Medical Register* placed physician Daniel Colquhoun at that address. West continued to operate an optician's shop in Lambeth, probably staying in business until his death in 1899.

Acknowledgements

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This and other illustrated biographies of early microscopists can also be viewed at the author's web site, <http://microscopist.net>

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