

SEIZE THE LIGHT

Bromley House Library's
photographic heritage



**BROMLEY
HOUSE
LIBRARY**
Established 1816

Discover Nottingham's hidden library



THE LIBRARY MOVES IN

Nottingham, 1816: The Nottingham Subscription Library (NSL) is established and rents premises in Carlton Street.

Nottingham, 1820: The NSL buys Bromley House, a four-storey Georgian town house just off the Market Square.

While staff set about lining the walls of Bromley House with bookshelves, library members indulged their lively interest in scientific discoveries. The library was an early user of gas and electric lighting, installed a telephone, and furnished the first-floor rooms with many examples of new technologies including barometers, long-case clocks, wind-direction apparatus and even a Meridian Line.

This willingness to embrace scientific innovation encouraged a pioneering Nottingham photographer to choose the library's attics for his ground-breaking business, and others followed in his footsteps. From 1841 to 1955, the attic rooms overlooking the garden were rented to a succession of creative entrepreneurs who have left us with a fascinating photographic legacy.



Neville Hoskins Reading Room

THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHS

Paris, January 1839: Louis Mandé Daguerre announces his newly-invented photographic process: the daguerreotype.

Although the French government offered the technique 'free to the world', Daguerre instructed his agent to apply for a British patent. The patent brought short-term profits but it also discouraged UK photographers from working with daguerreotypes and encouraged the development of competing photographic methods.

The first commercial photographic portrait studio in the Midlands

Nottingham, Spring 1841: Alfred Barber, the son of portrait artist Thomas Barber, is granted an exclusive licence to practice the daguerreotype professionally within the Borough of Nottingham.

Barber rented the attic rooms of Bromley House and installed a circular skylight, partially tinted blue, in the roof. It was operated by a cog mechanism which ensured the sitter was always under blue light regardless of the position of the sun. His studio became only the fifth daguerreotype studio outside London.

Creating a daguerreotype involved exposing a silver plated copper plate to iodine fumes, exposing it in the camera and developing the image in mercury vapour before fixing in saturated sea salt solution.



"I have seized the light - I have arrested its flight!"

Louis Daguerre

BARBER'S
PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT
STUDIO
BROMLEY HOUSE
NOTTINGHAM

Daguerreotype (and case)
© Eric Butler

THE STRUGGLES OF EARLY BROMLEY HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHERS

Bromley House Studio, 1841 – 1857: A series of photographers rent the space hoping to make their fortune – or at least a living – from their practice.

Alfred Barber sold his daguerreotypes in a velvet-lined leather case for the price of 1 guinea, equivalent to a week's wages for a manual worker, so only the affluent could afford to sit for him. While he managed to sell 500 portraits, he didn't make enough to cover the licence fee, skylight installation and equipment. In 1843 Barber absconded to the Channel Islands, where the patent did not apply.

Hungarian émigré George Popowitz moved in. He greatly reduced the cost per daguerreotype but was unable to make a profit and left to set up a studio in Edinburgh, free of the patent.

Joseph Whitlock, a daguerreotypist from Birmingham, took out two short rentals of the attics.

Between Whitlock's tenancies Mr E. Kaim, who previously worked as an itinerant photographer in Yorkshire under the name Herr Kaim of Dresden, rented the studio for thirteen months.

In 1849 Richard Young Booker took up the tenancy. He enhanced his daguerreotypes by mounting them in jewellery, but two years later he left with his rent in arrears.

John Frederick Davis took over the studio in 1853. By then the daguerreotype patent had expired, but Davis fell ill, the business failed and he left in 1857.



London, March 1851: Frederick Scott Archer publishes details of his wet plate collodion process in *'The Chemist'*. Now, many paper prints can be produced from one glass negative.

The 'wet plate' is a rectangle of glass or metal coated with collodion and other chemicals, such as silver nitrate, to make it light-sensitive, before fitting it into a camera and taking the photograph. Once developed, fixed and washed, an image appears on the plate from which prints can be taken. From coating to developing is a fast process, around 15-20 minutes, and must be completed before the plate dries.



SUCCESS AT LAST

Bromley House, 1858: Artist Sylvanus Redgate, who has been painting portraits in the library for three years, begins to rent the Bromley House Studio. He is able to take advantage of the cheaper collodion process and the popularity for cartes de visite - sepia toned paper portraits pasted onto card.

CARTES DE VISITE PRICES

1 position, 5 for 5 shillings
2 positions, 5 for 6 shillings
10 for 10 shillings

Redgate finally managed to turn a profit from the studio. Combining photography with his portrait painting, he worked in the Bromley House attics for 45 years, leaving at the end of 1900.



SAMUEL BOURNE

While Redgate successfully plied his trade in the attics, in 1863 adventurous Bromley House member Samuel Bourne left Nottingham for India, where he set up several studios with fellow-photographer Charles Shepherd. Bourne embarked on 3 long incident-filled photographic expeditions, finally visiting the High Himalayas. His photograph of the Manirung Pass at 186,000 feet set the record for a photograph taken at the highest altitude and held it for 25 years. The Bourne and Shepherd studio in Kolkata was the oldest in the world when it closed in 2016. It had continued to sell prints from Bourne's negatives until 1991, when they were destroyed in a fire.



Manirung Pass by Samuel Bourne (C. 1865)

THE STUDIO IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Bromley House, 1901: Wallace Edwin Middleton becomes the tenant of the Studio

Middleton initially specialised in portraiture, theatrical and fashion work, but settled on more lucrative architectural photography and blueprints. His son John (Jack) joined him as an assistant in 1925.

During this time some repairs were carried out including removal of the skylight.

Following his demobilisation after the war Jack Middleton returned to a sadly depleted business. In 1955 Middleton left Bromley House for premises on Regent Street, later moving to Long Row opposite Bromley House.

THE BROMLEY HOUSE STUDIO AND DARKROOM TODAY.

The growing library took back the attic spaces, installing shelving in the Studio and Dark Room. Removal of the skylight and other difficulties with the original roof caused leaks during heavy rainfall. A £700,000 project, partly funded by Historic England, saw the roof replaced and the attic rooms refurbished in 2019. A modern skylight was installed in the Studio and a glass mansard now overlooks the Bromley House garden.

The Dark Room remains closer to its original layout. This atmospheric space is enhanced by the red safety window. Behind a door off the Dark Room is the Plate Room, lined with shelves designed for storing glass photographic plates.



There is a display of vintage and antique cameras in the Dark Room, including a large plate bellows camera with contemporary lens and rise and fall camera stand. A cabinet in the Plate Room contains a display of Kodak cameras



PAULINE HEATHCOTE ARCHIVE

Pauline Heathcote researched the history of early photographers around the country as well as at Bromley House and the wider Nottingham area, and her work is frequently referenced. In 2015 Bernard Heathcote generously donated his late wife's archive to the library. Pauline's research notes and file indexes are stored in an oak cabinet. There is also a collection of cartes de visite, many by Nottingham photographers.

Thanks to Pauline and Bernard Heathcote, and others who have championed their work, Bromley House Library now occupies a pre-eminent position in the history of photography in Britain.

Any tour of Bromley House Library includes a visit to the Studio and Dark Room. For groups with a special interest in photography we can arrange a tailored presentation with a focus on photographic techniques and history. For more information please visit **bromleyhouse.org/visit-us**

Much of the information in this leaflet is from Pauline Heathcote's *'The Photographic Studio'* in the publication *Bromley House 1752-1991*.

Special thanks to Eric Butler for his vital contribution in highlighting and celebrating our photographic past.

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