



Living postcards

David Robinson looks at pictures of the past and introduces a new idea for their use in the future.

Below from left: St Botolph's Church, Boston; Immingham Dock 1912

Opposite from top to bottom: Lincolnshire seaside - Sutton on Sea c1920s; Tattershall Fair c1920s; Louth flash floods 1920; First electric tramcar, Lincoln 1905

The picture postcard has a long history from its golden age in Edwardian times to the digitally produced images of buildings and landscapes today. Early cards are now collector's items, commanding substantially more than their original few pence. Collections vary in content; some specialise in say windmills or steam trains, street markets of post offices, disasters or shipping. Mine, now many thousands, is confined to Lincolnshire and therefore includes all the above and many more.

At one time, and still today, a visit to the seaside or wherever was not complete without sending home or to friends a 'Wish you were here' picture postcard with a simple message on the back. Even the kind of postmark or date stamp on the back is collectable. If posted early in the day, they were delivered the same day, with say the time the train will arrive so the sender could be collected from the station.

But it is the picture in the front that brings the picture to life. Picture postcards are in fact our photographic heritage. That is why I collect. The picture is a story in itself. It records detail, sometimes vital in researching the past, about buildings, landscapes and social activities, which includes clues about change.

Let's take some examples. The Louth flash flood on the afternoon of Saturday 29th May 1920 was a disaster that claimed twenty-three lives. The next day photographers arrived to record the aftermath, quickly turning the pictures into postcards and cash in on their sale. With knowledge of the town, it is possible to identify locations and with the aid of newspaper reports to put together a minute by minute record of the disaster, as I have done in a book 'The Louth Flood 29th May 1920', using picture postcards as many of the illustrations.

The one illustrated here shows townspeople viewing the terrace cottages in Ramsgate completely destroyed by the surge of water, having overtopped the banks of the River Lud, along James Street opposite the terrace. It dramatically illustrates the power of water, as well as how people were drowned and how those who escaped did so.

The card of Tattershall Fair is in fact a painting (artist unknown) probably in the early 1920s, and is the only known pictorial record of it. It was not published to be sent by post, except in an envelope, as there is printed historical information on the back. This give the date of the annual fair, 25th September, and the erection of the market cross,



plus information about the rules for operating the fair in medieval times.

Another painted card is one of a series of six by F. Matuma for the Great Central Railway to publicise their new dock at Immingham opening in 1912. 'Available for largest ships at all tides. View of seven coal hoists capable of shipping 5,000 tons an hour.' trumpets the text on the back. Immingham was to be important for coaling steamships, and the interest here is to compare later photographs for the number of hoists and the type of ship - one here, third from right, has masts and sails as well as a steam funnel.

Special occasions were also an opportunity for the photographic postcard (people in the picture are bound to buy one). So it was along Newark Road in Lincoln for the trial run of the first electric tramcar, powered from metal studs in the road, on Sunday 29th October 1905. Those on board the tram were presumably members of the corporation and leading shareholders in the Lincoln Tramways Company.

Outstanding buildings sell many a picture postcard. In the case of St Botolph's Church, Boston, the tallest building in the Lincolnshire fens yet perversely called The Stump, requires an upright or portrait card. This view shows small boats in the tidal Haven, the River Witham, probably photographed near high tide, to judge from similar view cards. In fact it is by comparing similar views of different dates that is possible to detect changes in riverside buildings.

The most common picture postcard is that of the seaside, the wet skirt of land to which the working populace migrated briefly for the summer. The range and variety is vast and they are wonderfully evocative of days past - and gone. It is not just the seaside amenities which have changed but in Lincolnshire the very nature of the beach itself. From Mablethorpe to Skegness it is now of alien sand dredged from the bed of the North Sea. Without it the sea defences would be vulnerable.

One of my research interests over fifty years has been the changing nature of the Lincolnshire seaside. This 1920s sepia picture near Sutton on Sea is not only an attractive scene of children enjoying sand and water, but also one of the wooden breakwaters or groynes which were a feature since the late nineteenth century. They were designed to slow down the longshore drift of sand southwards and maintain beach levels. New ones were built after the 1953 storm flood, but by the 1980s were redundant and removed.

All of my books and many of my writings for the magazine and other publications have been illustrated in some way with picture postcards such as these, so sharing their interest with others. Now there is a new way of bringing back to life these images of the past; which is also a way of saving those still tucked away at the back of the drawer or gathering dust in the attic. The Living Postcard Company has been set up to provide a service where the nostalgic postcards and pictures can be captured digitally for posterity.

They have created a website where these images can be viewed and provides historians and museums with an economical method of placing picture archives in the public domain. It also creates a revenue stream, for each time a copy is ordered the owner is paid a royalty.

In partnership with the University of Lincoln the aim is to create a national archive of nostalgic images for everyone to enjoy and use. It will also be used as an educational resource for teaching our heritage to future generations.

For further information visit www.living-postcard.co.uk where you can also download a FREE screensaver of some of the pictures from my collection.

David Robinson OBE

