

John Charles Stovin ("JS" / "JCS"), 1814-1896

by Brian Stevenson, Kentucky, USA

Microphotograph slides bearing the phrase "*a photographic curiosity*" are moderately common in antique slide collections and for sale at auctions. Most also carry the initials "JS", although sometimes the middle initial is given, "JCS" (Figure 1). Stanley Warren (2006) presented a well-researched case which concluded that JS/JCS was almost certainly John C. Stovin. Confirmation of that identification was provided by the recent discovery of an 1881 publication by John Nicol, who wrote "*Nearly twenty years ago I was presented by the maker, Mr. J. C. Stovin, of London, with a box of 'London in miniature' - a series of thirty-six microscopic reductions of stereoscopic views of London - microphotographs mounted in the usual way on slips of glass with glass covers cemented on with Canada balsam*" (Figure 2).

Some Stovin photographs can be dated by their subject matter, ranging between 1859 and 1862. How much longer Stovin produced his curiosities is not yet known. He was reported to have operated a photographic studio from his home between 1859 and 1862, with the house serving only as a private residence after 1862. Stovin is known to have produced about 120 images with "JS" labels and another 30 using the "JCS" variant.

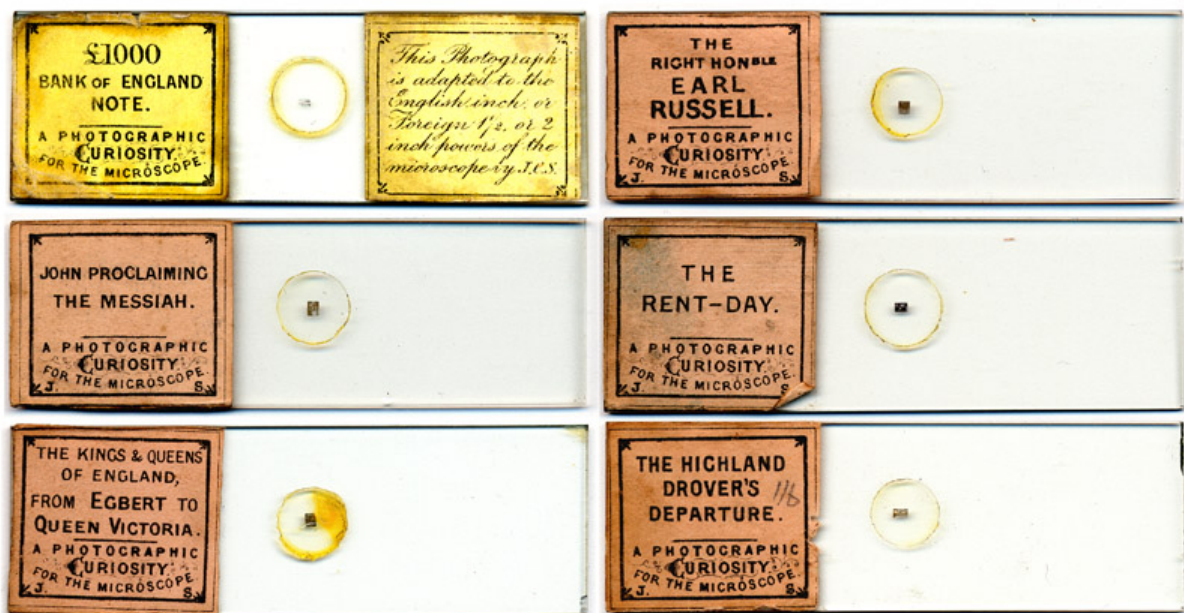


Figure 1. Examples of microphotograph slides by J.C. Stovin. The majority of his slides bear one, pale brown label and the initials "JS". As Warren (2006) pointed out, the use of two initials on the "JS" labels achieves artistic balance. Others carry two yellowish labels and the initials "JCS". Another producer of microphotographs, the as-yet unidentified "EM" used similar labels, and may have been a colleague of Stovin's, they may have copied each other, or simply patronized the same printer.

John Charles Stovin was born August 27, 1814, in East Retford, Nottinghamshire. He was the first child of George Charles and Anne Charlotte Spilsbury Stovin.

Father George was an officer in the Royal Navy. Although Stovin only reached the rank of Lieutenant, he was frequently referred to as "Captain Stovin", in that he once commanded His Majesty's ship *Algerine*. It is for that command that he is best remembered, having been mutinied against. Apparently, while serving in the area near China during 1834, Lt. Stovin was repeatedly so drunk that his junior officers felt him unfit to command, locked him in his cabin, and took control of the ship. The junior officers were later court-martialed for mutiny, and Stovin was court-martialed for not having put up any resistance:

"A Court-martial assembled on board his Majesty's ship Victory, in Portsmouth Harbour .. for the trial of Lieutenant George Charles Stovin, late in command of the Algerine, on charges of repeated acts of drunkenness and unofficer-like conduct, committed by him between the 6th of September and the 4th of November (1834). The Court having heard and examined the evidence in support of the prosecution, and having heard what the said Lieut. George Chas. Stovin had to allege in his defense, and having

heard the evidence adduced by him in support thereof, and having carefully and deliberately weighed and considered the whole, the Court is of opinion that the said charges have been proved in part, particularly the most unjustifiable conduct of the said Lieutenant G.C. Stovin, in allowing the command of his Majesty's brig Algerine to be taken from him by an inferior officer, on the 4th of November last, and which command the said Lieutenant Stovin, notwithstanding his then ill state of health, ought to have exerted himself to the utmost to retain, and to have commanded the officers and crew of the said brig to support him in so doing to the last extremity; but in consequence of the ill state of health in which the said Lieutenant G.C. Stovin was stated to be at the time of the said proceeding, and in consequence of the former active and intrepid services rendered by the said Lieutenant G.C. Stovin, and of his general good character prior to his joining his Majesty's ship Algerine, the Court doth only order and adjudge that the name of the said Lieutenant G.C. Stovin shall be placed at the bottom of the list of Lieutenants of the Royal Navy, and shall not be raised therefrom; and that he, the said Lieutenant Stovin, shall not be again employed in active service; and he, the said Lieutenant G.C. Stovin, is hereby so sentenced accordingly."

"A Court-martial was held on Monday the 10th of August, on board the Victory, in Portsmouth Harbour .. to try Mr. Charles Cardew, Mate, and Mr. Michael Heath, Acting Master, both late of his Majesty's brig Algerine, the former for mutinous conduct on board the said brig, in forcibly placing and confining Lieutenant Stovin, his superior officer, under arrest, and unlawfully depriving him of the command, and the latter for having connived at and aided Mr. Cardew in the commission of the said crime. The Court is of opinion that the charge against the said Charles Cardew hath been proved; but in consideration of the very peculiar circumstances in which the said Charles Cardew was placed at the time of the commission of the said offence, and of the long period during which he hath been under arrest, as well as of his testimonials of former good character and conduct, the Court doth only adjudge him to be dismissed from his Majesty's service, and to be imprisoned in the Marshalsea for the term of three calendar mouths. The Court is also of opinion that the above-mentioned charge against the said Michael Heath hath been proved; but in consideration of his having acted under feelings which had been outraged by a foul report respecting him, but in which report there doth not appear to the Court to be the slightest foundation; and also in consideration of the long period during which he hath been under arrest, as well as his testimonials of former good character and conduct, the Court doth only adjudge him, the said Michael Heath, to be dismissed from his Majesty's service, and to be imprisoned in the Marshalsea for three calendar months; and they, the said Charles Cardew and Michael Heath, are hereby respectively so sentenced accordingly."

Another scandal hit the Stovin family in 1838. Daughter Sarah Ann had married one Henry Napier Disney, a.k.a. Arthur Battersby. Unfortunately, Henry was already married. John Stovin was instrumental in tracking down records of the previous marriage. Disney/Battersby was arrested and tried at Old Bailey for bigamy. Being found guilty, he was transported to Australia.

Despite the scandals, the Stovin family retained a level of honor in society. For example, the children's marriages were reported in *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

From that resource, we learn that John C. Stovin married Mary Jones, "*the only Dau. of the Rev. T. Jones*", on February 19, 1851. The 1851 census, compiled shortly thereafter, reported John and Mary to be "*visitors*" (boarders) at a home in Marylebone, London. John (misprinted as "*James*") was described as being a "*general merchant*". In 1852, John dissolved a partnership he had with William Bibbens and Robert Blagden, with Bibbens and Blagden continuing that business and Stovin taking up other work. Additional references on Bibbens and Blagden suggest that they operated an import/export business, so presumably their partnership with Stovin was in that same vein.

Available records indicate that Stovin participated in a variety of other business ventures throughout his life. The 1859 christening record of his second son, George, listed John's occupation as "*gentleman*". While members of both the rich and the working classes might describe themselves as such on censuses, Stovin actually did move in affluent circles. In 1852, Stovin was involved in a scheme to raise funds to invest in Ecuador. He was associated with a mining company in 1862, Stovin was a partner in the Provincial Banking Corporation, Ltd., in 1865. In 1867, he was recorded as being a Director of the Oil and Lamp Black Company.

By the time of the 1861 census, John Stovin considered himself to be a "*photographer*". PhotoLondon reports that Stovin operated a photographic studio from White Lodge, Keppel Street, Chelsea, between 1859 and 1860. His studio then partnered with Charles Thorp between 1861 and 1862, working from the same address. Stovin's photography business appears to have ended after 1862.

The 1861 census listed the Stovin's home address as "White Cottage, Keppel St., Chelsea". Son George's christening record described the home as "Whitehead's grove". That address was also given for "Stovin and Co.", who exhibited "microscopic photographs" at the 1862 London International Exhibition. Additional records, including the 1871 census, refer to the 72 Keppel Street address, as "White Lodge" or "White Lodge, Whitehead's Grove", further confirming that the records cited by Warren (2006) do indeed refer to the John Charles Stovin in question.

At the 1862 London Exhibition, Stovin displayed both a group of microphotographs and a set of eleven full-sized photographs of London's "principal buildings". The published descriptions of those large photographs coincide with several JS slides labeled "London in miniature", and it is likely they were from the same negatives. Examples are illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Two microphotographs with titles that match descriptions of full-sized photographs displayed by Stovin at the 1862 London Exposition. According to Nicol (1881), Stovin expanded this series to 36 different views.

A report of the Exhibition in *The Photographic News* noted, "reduced copies of pictures for microscopic examination; the results, although partaking of the character of toys, may yet become of important application. Mr. Reeves (United Kingdom, 3144), Mr. Stovin (United Kingdom, 3163), and M. Dagron, France, 1546), exhibit interesting specimens in this class". It is notable that this magazine ignored the microphotographs of John B. Dancer, who also displayed at the 1862 London Exhibition.



Figure 3. Examples of Stovin's microphotographs. Clockwise from top left: "Her Majesty the Queen" (Victoria), "The Kings and Queens of England, from Egbert to Victoria", "His Royal Highness Prince Albert" (this exists in two label variants, with the word 'late' added after Prince Albert's death in 1861), and "H.R.H. The Prince of Wales" (who became King Edward VII upon Victoria's death in 1901). The kings and queens montage may have been a response to an acclaimed microphotograph produced by competitor Alfred Reeves, which showed pictures of English sovereigns from the Norman Conquest (1066) until Victoria. Stovin outdid Reeves by going further back in time to Egbert, who ruled 802-839.

At the time of the 1861 census, the Stovins employed a live-in servant, indicating that they were moderately well-off. Stovin's wife, Mary, died during the spring of 1861. On September 24, 1863, John Charles Stovin "widower, gentleman", married Elizabeth Russell Curling, 10 years his junior.

A man of his times, John Stovin was a creative inventor. In 1865, "John Charles Stovin, of Whitehead's-grove, Chelsea", was awarded two patents for improvements "in the means of communicating signals from passengers in railway trains to the guards and engine drivers". Later that year, he was awarded patent protection for improved methods to clean cotton seeds.

Just what John Stovin did for the remainder of his life remains a mystery. PhotoLondon reports that the Stovin's home served only as a private residence after 1862. Records have been located that document Stovin's involvement with a variety of businesses in England through 1867. The 1871 and 1881 censuses recorded Elizabeth as living at their home, White Lodge, 72 Keppel St., Chelsea, London. John was not at home during either census, nor has he been identified in the England census as being elsewhere in the country. There is a strong possibility that he went to New Zealand. That hypothesis is supported by his long-term absence from home, his apparent absence from English census records between 1871 and 1891, the many records of a man named John Charles Stovin who operated mining businesses in New Zealand during the 1870s, and the 1881 marriage of a man who had the exact name of John's younger son (George Foster Stovin) in Dunedin, New Zealand. If this was our John Charles Stovin, he later returned home to England, and died in early April, 1896, at the age of 83.



Figure 4. Images from slides by J.C. Stovin. Many of the images are exceedingly fine grained, and details are clear at moderately high magnifications.

Top row: "To the memory of Shakespeare, Stratford upon Avon" and "£1000 Bank of England Note" (an item which almost all of Stovin's customers could only dream of holding. The note is dated 28 April, 1859, serial number 32213).

Second row: "Oh!" and "The Vintage".

Third row: "May and December" and "The Last Appeal".

Bottom row: "Thine is the Kingdom, the Power & the Glory" and "The Orphans".

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

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Steve Gill for generously sharing information on J.C. Stovin.

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Presented in the May 2011 issue of Micscape, www.micscape.org