

Family portraits in Victorian Lancashire

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On an autumn day in 1858, a Lancashire husbandman named Ralph Moon and his wife Agnes dressed in their best attire and sat beside each other to have their portrait taken by a 'likeness capturer', who used the wet plate collodion process to produce what is today called an ambrotype.¹ This portrait has survived for more than 165 years, passing down through six generations to become the oldest item in the Moon/Prescott collection of nineteenth-century family portraits. At the time the portrait was taken, photography was the latest technology and was used as a medium for the expression of contemporary customs, tastes and values.² It had become fashionable for individuals and couples to have their portrait taken, and Ralph and Agnes Moon participated in that trend.³

This article aims to give a clearer understanding of the timeline of photography in the nineteenth century, in part by using photographs from my own family collection. The Moon/Prescott collection comprises twelve photographs covering each of the decades of the second half of the nineteenth century, making it a suitable collection to demonstrate the changes in the photographic process as well as shifts in taste and style in the mid-to-late Victorian period. The analysis of the items from the Moon/Prescott collection is divided between the four types of photographs it includes—ambrotype, ferrotype, *carte de visite* and *carte postale*—and provides a practical guide for anyone interested in dating and identifying key features in their own nineteenth-century portraits.⁴ The collection relates to a Lancashire family, but its principles are applicable anywhere.

The birth of photography and early photography in Lancashire

In 1826, from a window at his ancestral family estate Le Gras in the village of Saint-Loup-de-Varennes (Burgundy), the French inventor Nicéphore Niépce took the oldest surviving photograph of a real-world scene, using a camera obscura.⁵ The art of photography was born and its practice rapidly spread, as painters, inventors and chemists scrambled to be the first to make it commercially viable—Niépce's camera photographs required an incredibly long exposure time, sometimes up to several days. While innovators such as the Brazilian Hercules Florence, Englishman William Fox Talbot, and Frenchman Hippolyte Bayard experimented with approaches to the photographic method, it was French Romantic painter and printmaker Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre whose process emerged as the first commercially viable method.

Daguerre used a silver-plated surface sensitised by iodine vapour, developed with mercury vapour and 'fixed' with hot saturated salt water.⁶ This method enabled him in 1838 to take the first photograph which inadvertently included people—he had managed to dramatically reduce the exposure time required, and captured a man having his shoes polished on a Parisian street below his studio.⁷ After Daguerre's method was announced to the world in Paris in August 1839, competition became fiercer than ever, as those involved knew that patenting a method whose exposure time could beat the daguerreotype would earn them a fortune.⁸ In Britain in 1839 the first photograph of the streets of London was taken, specifically of the equestrian statue of

Charles I at Charing Cross. However, widespread enthusiasm for photography among the British was triggered by the royal family: in 1842 Albert, the Prince Consort, had his portrait taken (making it the earliest known royal photograph)⁹ and Queen Victoria was photographed for the first time in 1844.¹⁰

With daguerreotypes growing in popularity in England, the sculptor Frederick Scott Archer experimented with a new photographic process in 1848 and eventually published it in 1851. However, he made the error of publishing his method first without patenting it, so made very little money from his invention: he died impoverished in 1857.¹¹ Archer's wet plate collodion process enabled photographers to produce ambrotypes, which were deliberately underexposed negatives that could be optimised for viewing as positives.¹² Ambrotypes were far less expensive to produce than the daguerreotype, which made them commercially superior. Their production swept across England.¹³ Costing just one shilling by 1857, ambrotypes brought photography to the working class, so they appear more frequently in family collections than their predecessor. The drastically lower cost indicates why the portrait of Ralph and Agnes Moon was produced in 1858.¹⁴

The only mention of photography in northern newspapers during the 1830s was in the *Liverpool Albion* in August 1839, referring to the daguerreotype that had just been revealed in Paris.¹⁵ In the 1840s, however, over a thousand mentions of this photographic process were made in Lancashire newspapers alone, with services for portrait-taking being advertised in towns and cities including Blackburn, Blackpool, Bolton, Liverpool, Manchester and Preston as well as Lancaster and Ulverston. The service was referred to as 'photographic likenesses'.¹⁶ Although commercial portraiture in the county originated in the 1840s, not until the second half of the 1850s was it affordable to large numbers of the public, due to the introduction of the ambrotype.¹⁷

However, in September 1841, we find the earliest opportunity for members of the public in Lancashire to have their portraits taken. In what is today St James' Mount and Gardens in Liverpool, John Relph organised an event at which the public could have their likenesses taken in under one minute for just one guinea each, including a frame.¹⁸ Commercial portraiture open to the public continued daily at St James' Mount thereafter. On the other side of the county, Manchester was slower to offer the public portraits of their likenesses, due to a delay in obtaining the necessary patent for establishing such an enterprise there,¹⁹ but from the spring of 1842 a photography booth was set up near the Manchester Exchange.²⁰ It took a little longer to penetrate the smaller towns of the region: Chester acquired a photographic establishment in 1844, and Preston in 1846.²¹ By 1848, Mr Eastham had expanded his portraiture business to the nearby town of Blackburn,²² while Mr G. White had established himself as a portrait photographer at Fleetwood by 1849.²³

Some key individuals born in Lancashire contributed to the development of photographic processes as well as commercial photography. John Mercer, best known for developing the process of mercerisation as a method for treating cotton,²⁴ was a dye and fabric chemist. He experimented with early colour photography and managed to produce colour photographic prints on cloth in the mid-1850s.²⁵ Another Lancastrian photographic pioneer was Roger Fenton, who was born at Crimble Hall in Heywood in 1819.²⁶ After visiting the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851, Fenton left for Paris where he learned the waxed paper calotype process of photography that was popular in the early 1850s. Although he took many photographs around England and was the founder of the Royal Photographic Society under patronage of Prince Albert, Fenton was best-known for his photographic documentation of the Crimean War (1853-1856).²⁷ Meanwhile, Edward Mellor of Bury combined his interest in photography

with his desire to travel, taking photographs in locations as exotic as Egypt, India and Jamaica throughout the Edwardian period and later hosting exhibitions attended by hundreds of people.²⁸ Some photographs in Mellor's collection are in colour although these were probably hand-painted afterwards, since colour photography was still in its infancy at this time.²⁹ Before analysing the items from the Moon/Prescott family collection, it will be useful to establish an overview of the different types of Victorian portraits and their components to contextualise the tools used for conducting the analysis of the family portraits.

Components of Victorian portraits

To construct a guide for dating and interpreting portraits taken in the Victorian era, it is useful to look at specific features to indicate what one should look for when assessing them.³⁰ It should be noted that none of the components mentioned below should be used in isolation—these indicators should be used comprehensively. The initial consideration when studying any nineteenth-century portrait should be the photographic process used to create it or its card/mount type.³¹ From the mid-century onwards, several photographic processes and card types were used to create and display photographs. Identifying which has been used plays a key role in determining the period in which the portrait was taken. Examples are given for each process and card type from the Moon/Prescott collection. Below is an overview of the photographic processes or card types.

Daguerreotype: the first photographic process to reach Britain (in 1839). It was most popular during the 1840s and although it continued to be used in the early 1850s, it had been completely superseded by the ambrotype by the end of the decade due to its costliness and impractical exposure time.³² This type was most often encased and it is the rarest to come across in any British collection. Some daguerreotypes fetch considerable sums in the marketplace for antique photographs.

Calotype: also known as the **talbotype**, this photographic process was used in Lancashire in the 1840s as evidenced by advertisements in Liverpool, Manchester and Preston newspapers. Although it was made available to the public at a similar time to the daguerreotype, it never surpassed its rival in popularity, due in part to its restriction through patents. It also produced an inferior image, especially for portraits.³³

Ambrotype: this photographic process produced what in Britain was commonly called **collodions**. The ambrotype was introduced in 1851 but its greatest popularity in Britain was between 1854 and 1865, after which it was replaced by the cheaper **tintype** as well as **cartes de visite**.³⁴ A rarity in family collections, British collodions are usually distinguished by their glass frontage, coloured inner frame (often golden) as well as a coloured line around the photograph.³⁵ See fig.1 for an example of an ambrotype, and also the front cover.

Ferrotypes: known among the British public as the **tintype**, this photographic process was introduced to Britain from 1853 but took some time to become popular. Most family collection ferrotypes are from the 1860s to the mid-1870s, after which the method died out.³⁶ Most ferrotypes were inferior in quality compared with ambrotypes but they were far cheaper to produce, which accounts for their popularity for a brief period. Figure 2 is an example of a framed ferrotype.

Cartes de visite: known in English as a visiting card, this card type is likely to form the bulk of any British family collection from the nineteenth century.³⁷ *Cartes de visite* were albumen prints from a collodion negative, glued onto a thick paper card. Although

rarely framed, they were often collected and inserted into elaborate albums specially made to display portraits.³⁸ Despite being patented and first produced in the 1850s, *cartes de visite* were most popular in Britain from the 1860s to the 1880s, although they continued in production until the end of the Edwardian period.³⁹ See figs.3 to 10 for examples of *cartes de visite* from the 1850s to the 1880s.

Cabinet card:⁴⁰ larger than the *carte de visite*, this type was in production from the early 1870s until 1924.⁴¹ The primary difference between a *carte de visite* and a cabinet card is the smaller size of the former, which typically measures only 2½" x 4", while the latter is usually 4½" x 6½".⁴² The lack of a cabinet card in the Moon/Prescott collection is explained by the fact that this card type was less common in England than in the United States, where it enjoyed considerable popularity.⁴³

Carte postale: known in English as a postcard, this card type was first produced in Britain in the 1890s as the successor to the *carte de visite* and continued to enjoy immense popularity for studio portraits until after the Second World War. See Figures 11 and 12 for early examples of *cartes postale* in the mid-1890s.

The content of a portrait naturally consists of what is visible in the photograph itself, with three main aspects to consider for the purposes of dating the image: a) the clothing worn by the subjects; b) the background and setting for the portrait; and c) its composition, including how the person or people are sitting, what they are holding and any special purposes for which the portrait was taken. Ascertaining a date for a portrait by looking at its content requires some knowledge about Victorian fashion and tastes as well as customs and values which may be difficult for non-experts to deduce. However, numerous published works help with dating portraits, the work of Robert Pols being particularly important. As noted, there are several points to be remembered when trying to date nineteenth-century photographs. The content of the photograph should be treated with caution—for example, a subject might not wear clothing popular at the time. For working class subjects, their best attire might have been acquired a considerable time before the portrait was taken and so might not match contemporary fashion. Moreover, just as today, older people were arguably more likely to wear clothing popular in a previous era. Furthermore, no indicator should be used alone for identifying the date: all the features should be brought together to establish an estimate. It is also important to manage expectations—one might have to accept that a ten-year window during which a portrait could have been taken is the best that can be achieved.

What is written on the reverse of nineteenth-century portraits can be just as helpful in narrowing down their date as the portrait itself and can also help in establishing other facts. On the reverse of *cartes de visite* for example, photographers began to include a symbol or logo featuring the location of their studio. These became more elaborate over time, particularly from the 1870s. To make use of these identifiers, search the British Newspaper Archives for advertisements from the photographer or look in directories to establish as much information as possible regarding their studio(s). This should help to clarify when and where the portrait was taken. For those photographers who received royal warrants, there may be additional information that could narrow down a portrait's date by providing further context as to when it was taken.

The Moon/Prescott collection

Dating nineteenth-century portraits can be difficult even for experienced genealogists and historians, and may require bringing together expertise in different areas.⁴⁴ To illustrate the processes one might employ to determine the origins of the Victorian

portraits, we now consider my own portraits of ancestors in the Moon/Prescott family. An example of each type of photograph has been chosen from the collection to show the differences in photographic process, style, setting and composition over the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Although the period when the photographer was working at a particular address can help to determine the date if matched with information available in directories, the card may be a copy of an earlier photograph taken at a different location.⁴⁶

Ambrotype: Figure 1 (also on front cover) is the oldest photograph in the collection and is a framed ambrotype portrait with a glass fronting. It shows the farmer Ralph Moon sitting beside his wife Agnes (née Taylor), residents of the village of Eccleston ten miles south of Preston. It is believed to have been taken in the autumn of 1858 (this year having been written on the reverse). Frederick Scott Archer's collodion process superseded the calotype and came into widespread commercial use in 1854 but was itself replaced in the mid-1860s by the tintype. This helps to corroborate an 1858 date for the ambrotype.⁴⁷

As this portrait is an ambrotype (also known as a collodion positive in England), it is unique since this type of photograph could not be multiplied unlike later *cartes de visite*.⁴⁸ This 1858 portrait was taken at a time when portrait photography was growing in popularity—the Moons were 'on trend'. Although there is no indicator as to the identity of the photographer on the item itself, it is likely to have been taken by Robert Pateson, who was active in the area of Preston as a collodion photographer in the autumn of 1858. He returned to his studio in Lancaster in early 1859,⁴⁹ but advertised in the *Preston Chronicle* in October, November and December 1858, offering to take negative and positive collodions at people's residences. This suggests that the portrait was taken at their home, Woodcock Hall in Eccleston.



1 Obverse and reverse of a framed ambrotype of Ralph and Agnes Moon of Woodcock Hall, Eccleston (1858)

Mrs Moon's ring has been touched up with a hint of gold, a common practice among those who developed collodions, usually to emphasise jewellery. Revealing the early date of the portrait, Mr Moon wears a large dotted cravat and Mrs Moon wears a crinoline and bonnet. There is a simplicity about their clothing and the setting in comparison



2 Obverse of a framed ferrotype of Elizabeth Moon of Daisy Hill Farm, Euxton (1861)

of the family. This collodion may then have come into the possession of Mary's brother John Moon and sister-in-law Ellen. When Ellen died in 1891, it could have passed to her daughter Elizabeth Prescott. However, an alternative theory is that the collodion was produced as a gift for Ralph and Agnes' granddaughter, also named Mary Moon, who died in 1912 and whose sister Elizabeth Prescott may have inherited it from her. Elizabeth's daughter Theresa Blackledge inherited it in 1935. When Theresa died in 1976, the collodion was inherited by her daughter Josephine who, in 2023, gave it to me, her relative.

Ferrotype: The next development in portraiture saw the introduction of the tintype (more accurately, the ferrotype, as it was a photograph on a piece of iron rather than on glass as was the case for earlier ambrotypes). The example from the Moon/Prescott collection is a portrait of my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Moon when she was a child. Tintypes are usually easy to identify but if they are framed, as with this example, this can be more difficult. Elizabeth was born in 1856, and this portrait is estimated to have been taken in 1861, when ambrotypes were beginning to lose popularity. The first feature to note is the drastically poorer quality of this portrait compared with the previous example. As the wet plate collodion process became more popular in the early 1860s, photographers produced cheaper ambrotypes to make them more affordable, leading to poorer quality tintypes. The golden edging is typical of the tintype as is a lack of information on the reverse about the photographer: he was likely a travelling amateur, producing thousands of these lower quality photographs.

Elizabeth, about five years old at the time the portrait was taken, wears a wide-brimmed bonnet and a white dress with large cuffs. Some detailing around the area of her neck and chest can just be made out.⁵³ The portrait was likely taken on the

with portraits produced later in the century.⁵⁰ The man has placed his arm behind (though not around) his wife, with his hand left hanging, showing a sense of relaxation which is an uncommon feature of Victorian portraiture. The couple were quite old when this portrait was taken: Mr Moon was 80 and his wife 76. Ralph was descended from the Moon family of Eccleston, who owned many tenements in and around that village.⁵¹ The family moved there in about 1727, having previously lived on the Fylde coast.⁵²

Since her name is written on the reverse, it may be that Mary Moon, the daughter of Ralph and Agnes, commissioned the collodion and that she inherited it from her mother in 1865. Mary was a spinster: following her death in 1882, her belongings were dispersed among members



3 Obverse and reverse of a *carte de visite* of Agnes Moon of Ridley Lane, Mawdesley (circa 1862)



4 Obverse and reverse of a *carte de visite* of Agnes Bamber (née Moon) of Wellington Street, Accrington (1881)

spur of the moment, probably during a day at the seaside. That was where travelling photographers typically stationed themselves, ready to take the portraits of passersby as souvenirs. The edges of the picture have crinkled over time but the piece of iron at the back to keep the portrait in position can still be distinctly felt.

Cartes de visite These are the most common type of photographs in the Moon/Prescott collection. The first example studied features a familiar face, namely Agnes Moon from the earlier ambrotype. However, in this portrait she wears a traditional Victorian mourning dress following the death of her husband Ralph in 1859. As was typical of 1860s portraits, she is seated and pictured full-length, holding a book and with a drape in the background as well as a writing desk. Agnes died in 1865, which places this portrait sometime between 1859 and 1865. Another indicator of its date is that her hair has a centre parting with her ears covered, as was customary in the early 1860s.⁵⁴

The photographer's information on the reverse of the card does not help in determining its date, because the card itself is a copy of an older image. The photographer's stated address does not match the period when the photograph was taken. The photographer Isaac Bradley was at 82 Fishergate in Preston between 1869 and 1872, suggesting that the reproduction was made sometime during this three-year period. That is also indicated by the observe featuring the photographer's name and location, although



5 Obverse and reverse of a copy of a carte de visite of Elizabeth Moon commemorating her first Holy Communion (1865)

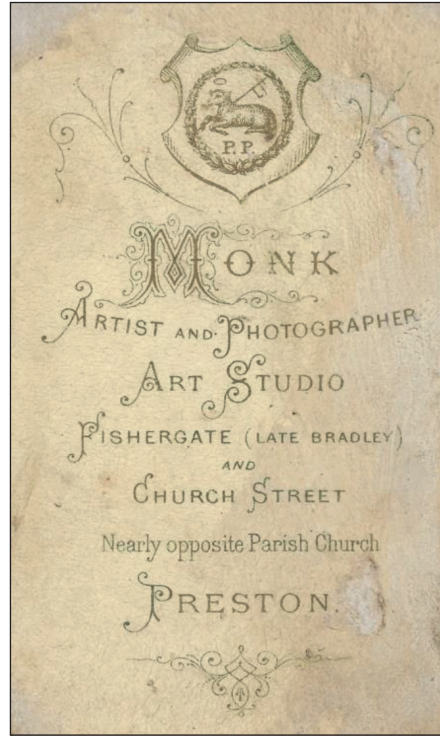
these are hard to see due to fading. The simpler logo design suggests an older copy, helping to confirm a date at the turn of the 1870s. Later logos became more elaborate. The mourning portrait became a fashion in the 1860s. Queen Victoria was pictured in mourning after Prince Albert died in 1861, sparking a fascination with the photographic expression of widowhood.⁵⁵

The *carte de visite* in fig.4 depicts the granddaughter of Ralph and Agnes, who was named after her grandmother and married a man called Bamber, from Accrington. To determine the identity of a subject or their age, one should check if anything is stated on the reverse. In this case, there is a trade-plate for Tattersall & Rogers of Accrington, showing some restrained ornamentation. The general rule for dating a Victorian *carte de visite* is that the more elaborate the design, whether in the image itself or on the photographer's logo, the later the *carte de visite*. In this case, note that Tattersall & Rogers of Accrington were both art photographers and chemists, a common combination during this period as taking photographs boosted income. Here one can use the location of the photographer in identifying a portrait subject and estimating the period in which it was taken. Of the Moon grandchildren, Agnes married a man from Accrington and moved there from her home village of Euxton near Chorley. Estimated to be around 27 at the time the portrait was taken, she died shortly after of Bright's disease. She wears a locket, lace frills on her dress and her hair scraped back with a centre parting as was customary for the period. The oval shape of the portrait reflects the aesthetic tastes of the time, in which female beauty was associated with an oval-shaped face.⁵⁶

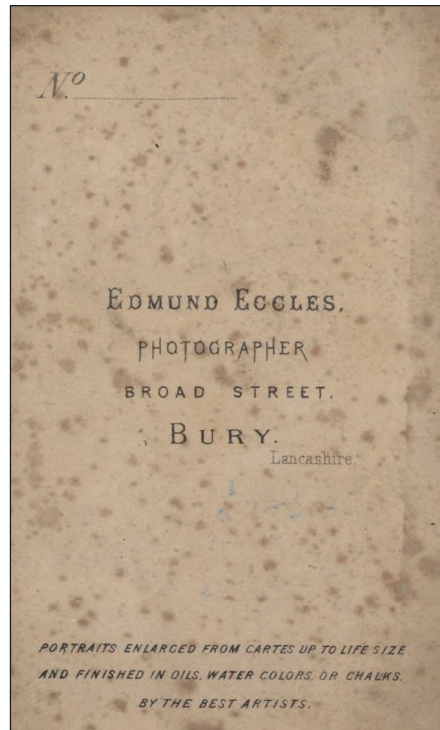
Cartes de visite were not restricted to adults: children could be subjects if they were willing to stand or sit still for long enough for the exposure (which is why some portraits of children are blurred).⁵⁷ The example of a *carte de visite* in this sub-category is another portrait of Elizabeth Moon, taken in 1865 when she was eight years old. That this is a copy is shown by the picture looking older than the reverse of the card. There are several points of interest. The first is the increase in elaboration of the setting, featuring a chair with a padded back, drapes and even a balustrade to achieve the classical look that was popular during this period. Also noteworthy for dating is the embellished ruffle dress, typical of girls' clothing from the 1860s,⁵⁸ and the informal hairstyle using a headband as opposed to a bonnet. The girl holds a hat which may have some symbolic significance and she stands in a 'staged' way with one foot behind the other, on her tiptoes. Notice also that Elizabeth wears a ribbon necklace with a cross, probably indicating that the portrait was taken to commemorate her first Holy Communion. Finally, the photographer's logo on the reverse of the card is the most ornamental of the collection, suggesting that this copy was produced around 1879, when Monk opened his new premises on Church Street in Preston, which he called the Grand Imperial Studio.

The next *carte de visite* (fig.6) is a full-length portrait of Agnes Bamber (née Moon) when she was about 23. This time she was photographed in a frilled dress, posed leaning against a chair with her hand beneath her chin. The example dates from the mid-1870s, as indicated by key features. In the late 1860s and through the 1870s, seats were generally used for leaning on rather than sitting, and typically they were elaborate chairs with padded backs and fringes. Lecterns might also feature, as on the right side of this portrait.⁵⁹ The hairstyle is also characteristic of the 1870s, with the same fringe style worn by Princess Alexandra, and the exposure of Agnes' ears. The reverse of this card has the least elaborate photographer's logo of the collection, suggesting a date in the mid-1870s.

Figure 7 shows a similar *carte de visite* of a member of the Moon/Prescott family dated to around 1880, a time of shifting tastes and styles in the new decade. Thus, many of the elements of a typical 1870s' portrait are present such as the use of the chair



6 Obverse and reverse of a *carte de visite* of Agnes Moon (circa 1876)

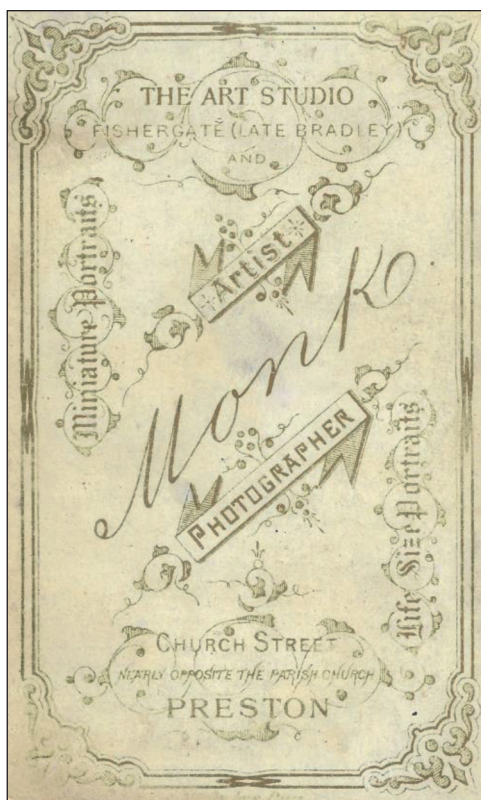


7 Obverse and reverse of a *carte de visite* of a member of the Moon/Prescott family (circa 1880)

for leaning rather than sitting, as well as drapes and a classical wall feature to the right. However, gone are the ruffle dresses, elaborate hairstyles and complex necklines, replaced by simpler hair following the shape of her head, a shoulder pad with a fringe and a more defined neckline perhaps with a jabot that is almost visible.⁶⁰ The woman looks to be middle-aged and most likely in mourning.

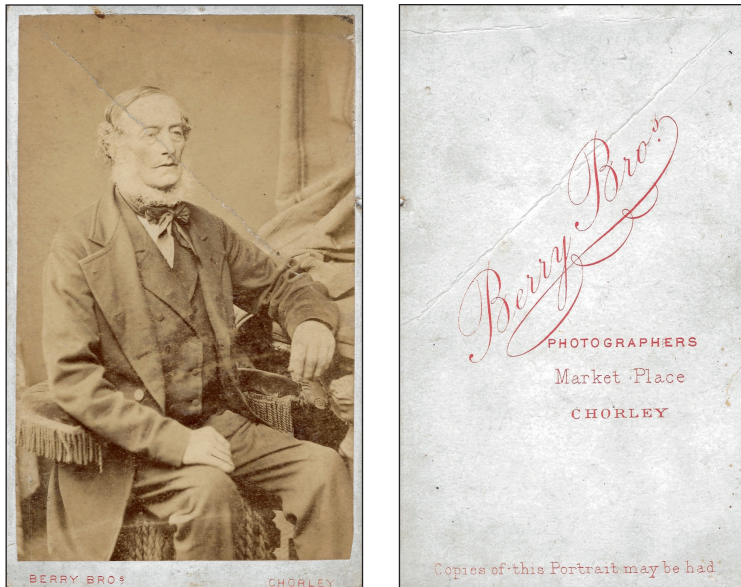
The eagle-eyed might noticed the name of the printer, 'Marion Imp Paris', at the very bottom of the obverse of this card. At first glance, this does not help with dating the portrait, but the theory of family historian Robert Vaughan might confirm an 1880 date. In 2003 Vaughan suggested that the dots and dashes he had noticed on either side or just one side of the printer's name (and only on *cartes de visite* produced during the 1880s) formed a date code.⁶¹ For instance, one dot or dash on either side of the printer's name indicates the card was produced in 1882. Vaughan warned that the printer's name was written just as 'Marion Imp Paris' in the 1870s but that this does not discount that a portrait could have been taken later.

For instance, the example in fig.7 has no dots nor dashes, perhaps implying that the mount on which the photograph was placed was printed in the 1870s and used for this portrait in 1880 as old stock. This may also explain why the reverse side of the card is surprisingly simple for the estimated date. Another clue for dating is that the logo mentions 'late Bradley: Isaac Bradley occupied the studio at 82 Fishergate from 1869 to 1872 and 41 Fishergate from 1879 to 1881, with J. Monk having the 82 Fishergate studio in between. This may suggest that the mount was printed sometime during this seven-year period, perhaps towards the end of the 1870s. That also suggests an 1880 date.



8 Obverse and reverse of a *carte de visite* of a member of the Moon/Prescott family and his son (mid- to late-1870s)

Figure 8 shows a man seated with his child on his lap: the latter is wearing a dress, but the child's short hair indicates it was probably a boy. The practice of breeching was widely adhered to in the Victorian period and even into the early twentieth century.⁶² The slight blurring of the child's face and hand suggests some movement during the exposure for the photograph. The man's waistcoat and trousers match, indicating that the portrait was taken some time in the 1870s or 1880s, as this was the prevalent style.⁶³ However, the lack of details other than the chair and drapes makes the date of this portrait harder to pinpoint with precision. The reverse of the card refers to photographer J. Monk's studio on Fishergate, formerly occupied by Isaac Bradley, suggesting that the card was printed sometime between 1872 and 1879. The faded name Marion Imp Paris (with no dashes or dots) is just visible at the bottom of the obverse, implying a similar date to the previous item.⁶⁴



9 Obverse and reverse of a *carte de visite* of an elderly gentleman of the Moon/Prescott family (circa 1869)

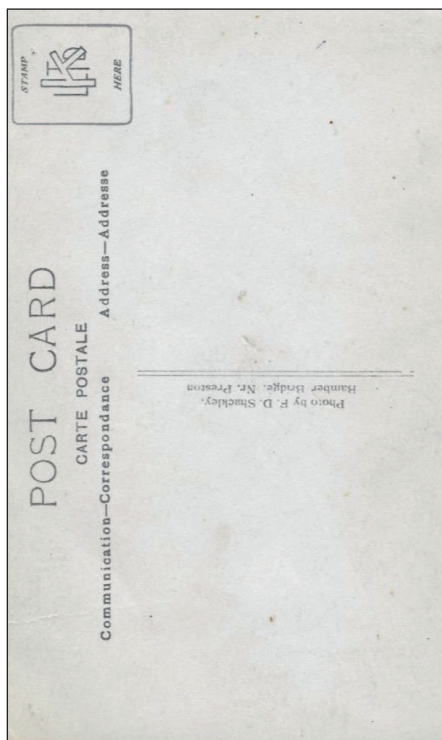
Figure 9, the penultimate example of a *carte de visite* from the collection, comes from a card produced by the Berry Brothers of Chorley who were in business at Market Place from 1867 to 1874. This confirms that this portrait was taken sometime during that period. Analysis of this portrait might try to establish whether it was taken in the late 1860s or the early 1870s.⁶⁵ The man looks to be in his early sixties, which is perhaps why he has chosen to sit for the portrait as opposed to stand and lean against the chair, a pose which had become more common by the late 1860s. He leans against a table or writing desk which seems to be covered with a drape that, unusually, has been left in a ruffled position. The more elaborate chairs such as those with fringes, as in this example, began to appear from around 1870, while the three-quarter length figure would also suggest a date in the 1870s. The man wears a smaller cravat pulled tight and a double-breasted waistcoat, but it is not buttoned tightly.⁶⁶ In the early nineteenth century, beards were regarded as a sign of degeneracy and unkemptness but by the 1850s they had become fashionable, denoting class, sophistication, worldliness and intelligence. The relative sparseness of the background suggests an earlier image from perhaps 1869 or 1870.



10 Obverse of a *carte de visite* of a member of the Moon/Prescott family (circa 1859)

The man in the *carte de visite* of fig.10 is believed to be the same man, but a decade or so younger. His attire, the sparse background and the general composition of this portrait, as well as the lack of any information about the photographer on either its obverse or reverse, suggest that it is the oldest of the *cartes de visite* in the collection. It is proposed that this portrait dates from around 1859. The background is neutral and has no curtain, a ubiquitous feature of portraiture from 1860 onwards. The man leans against a table draped with a patterned tablecloth and his picture is taken at three-quarter length. His costume is also more characteristic of 1850s' male fashion, with a high coat and shirt collar as well as large cravat and loose-fitted waistcoat, jacket and trousers.⁶⁷

Carte postale: The very first British picture postcards (or *carte postale*) appeared in September 1894, which establishes a starting date for these types of portraits in all British collections.⁶⁸ The example



11 Obverse and reverse of a *carte postale* of a member of the Prescott family (circa 1897)

is that of a member of the Prescott family who looks to be in her thirties or forties when the portrait was taken by F.D. Shackley of Bamber Bridge. The use of vignettes only appeared in the 1890s, which helps to confirm the date of this portrait.⁶⁹ The elaborate design on the chair, and the three-quarter length body shot, also indicate the portrait's origins in the 1890s. The black clothing may suggest the woman is in mourning; her complex frilled dress and the loop or coil of hair at the back of her head also characteristic of the popular style between 1895 to 1900.⁷⁰ It is thought that her holding a piece of paper for the portrait has some symbolic significance. Although the photograph itself is considered to date from the mid-1890s, it was copied to produce the *carte postale* itself several years later, in the Edwardian era, because that includes a space for correspondence on the reverse, which the British Post Office only allowed after 1902.⁷¹



12 Obverse and reverse of a *carte postale* of Joseph Prescott (circa 1897)

Figure 12, the final example of a *carte postale* from the collection, depicts Joseph Prescott. The striking similarity in style and the use of the same photographer indicates that this and the previous portrait were taken at a similar time, if not on the same day. The man wears a lounge suit, which was very popular from the 1890s onwards. This, as well as the baggier look of the suit (which was the common style) helps to confirm the date of this portrait.

Conclusion

Surveying the series of portraits from the Moon/Prescott collection from the 1850s to the 1890s has chronicled significant changes, not only in fashion and style but in the development of the photographic process itself during the second half of the nineteenth

century.⁷² It is hoped that with the examples provided and analysis conducted in this article, other family and local historians will find dating and interpreting their own Victorian portraits easier. Using items in the Moon/Prescott collection as examples, comments have been made on how and why Victorian portraits were produced along with a brief history of portrait photography in the context of developments in commercial photography more broadly. The 1858 ambrotype of Ralph and Agnes Moon is fascinating, not only for its great age but for the good condition in which it has remained and for its insight on the fashion, interests and values of the mid-Victorian period.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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