

# Understanding Old Family Photographs



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A short talk about various aspects of the art of understanding family photographs, particularly those from the 19th century.

The emphasis is on highlighting the factors to look for in the photo which should enable one to start the process of identifying the period of the photo, the sitter(s) and the occasion.

The approach is to identify 101 questions to ask about the type of photo, the mount or frame, the background to the picture, and the people within it. Note carefully who the photo belongs to and who else in the family has a copy, cousins, aunts/uncles etc.

Keep in mind that in the 19th century in particular, photographs were expensive and took time to arrange with the photographer and/or studio and the sitters. Generally, there was a special reason for the photograph, try to work out what was the occasion.

# Aspects of the Photograph

- Print & Format
- Types of Mount and/or Frame
- Studio/Photographer Identification
- Setting/Composition
- Women's Dress Fashions
- Women's Hair & Hats
- Children's Clothes
- Men's Clothing
- Men's Hats, Hair & Neck Clothes
- Uniforms
- The Occasion being Celebrated
- Arrangement of People
- Conclusions

# Print and Format Styles - what to look for

- Is the picture printed on glass?
- Is the picture printed on metal?
- If on paper, is it black & white or sepia tones?
- If black & white is it good contrast or shades of grey?
- If coloured, is this done by hand?
- What type is the paper, thick, thin, postcard?
- What shape is the picture: square, landscape, portrait, circular, vignette?
- N.B. some types of processing reverse the image

# Print and Format Dates - 1

- Daguerreotypes c.1841 – early 1860s (most common c.1845-55)
- Ambrotypes (collodion positives) c.1852-1890s (most common 1855-early 1860s)
- A negative image on a glass plate, backed with black varnish ( shellac ) or velvet to create a positive photograph. Image may be reversed.
- Cartes de visite c.1858-1919 (most common c.1860-1908)
- The small carte de visite, around 10cms x 6.5cms. First commercially produced card-mounted photo print.

## Print and Format Dates -2

- Cabinet Prints c.1866-1919 (most common late 1870s-c.1910)
- Cabinet Photograph introduced 1866 – print mounted onto card, around 16.5cms x 11.5cms including the mount, over twice the size of the cdv.
- Tintypes (ferrotypes) In Britain 1870s-1940s
- The tintype, or ferrotype, a photographic image struck directly onto an iron plate. Image reversed.
- Portrait postcards c.1902-1940s: postcard sized, with space for address etc on the reverse.

# Types of Mount and/or Frame

- What size is the mount, in inches?
- What thickness is the mount card?
- Are the corners round or square?
- What colour is the card, soft or stronger, dark?
- What lettering style is used on the front?
- What is the design on the back – plain or fancy?
- Does the reverse include birds, plants, fans etc?
- Does the mount or frame seem to be missing?
- Is the mount or photograph edged in black?

# Studio/Photographer Identification

- Is the photographer identified on the front or back?
- Is this name listed on any photographic database?
- Are any dates of awards, exhibitions given?
- Is the photographer's address given?
- Is any royal warrant claimed?
- Is this business listed in Post Office/Kelly's directories for the location and period?
- Was the picture taken in the studio, at home or outdoors?
- What can you see in the background: screens, stands, props etc.?



# What is the setting/composition?

- A large group of people?
- A small group of people?
- An individual?
- Height: full, three-quarter, half, head & neck?
- Is anything displayed, books, trophies?
- Are there any flowers/bouquets on display?
- Are the hands and rings prominently displayed?
- Any other unusual aspects?
- Family likenesses between faces?

# Women's Dress Fashions

- Dresses or skirts with bodices?
- Corsets, crinolines, bustles, trains?
- Blouses, ruffs, necklines?
- Buttons plain or ornamental?
- Sleeves, long, short, or in between?
- Sleeves, narrow, wide, or both – also cuffs?
- Gloves, worn or held in hands?
- Skirts full, narrow, long, short etc.
- Dressing up clothes, pastoral, wild-west scenes?

# Women's Hair & Hats

- Ringlets, loops or coils of hair, extra hair?
- Bun placement, central, back of head, top of head?
- Central parting, ears covered, ears exposed?
- Plain or ornate style
- ring: plain or crimped?
- Bonnet or indoor cap?
- Pork pie hat, small hat, boaters for women?
- High neckline, pie-crust frill, small collar, brooches?
- Varied neckline, frills, scarves, jabots?

# Children's Clothes

- Christening robes?
- Boys wore dresses until 'breeched' circa age four.
- Sailor suits – boys
- Sailor skirts/tops – girls?
- Ribbons or frills, skirts layered or flounced?
- Short crinolines showing pantaloons – girls?
- Knickerbockers or “Little Lord Fauntleroy” look?
- Smocked Yoke dresses?
- Scottish look, e.g. plaids?
- Plain, elaborate or complicated girls styles?

# Men's clothing

- Frock coat or morning coat?
- Dress suit or Lounge suit?
- Lapels long or short, wide or narrow?
- Everyday or working clothes?
- Waistcoat high or low fronted?
- Norfolk jacket, reefer jacket?
- Trousers wide/narrow, pinstripe, creases, turn-ups?
- Shoes, boots?
- Walking stick, cane, riding whip?
- Dressing up clothes, pastoral, wild-west scenes?

# Men's Hats, Hair & Neck attire

- Top hat, how high, what crown?
- Top hat brim - flat, wide, narrow?
- Bowler style, height?
- Boater, homburg etc style?
- Collar height?
- Cravat, large/loose, or narrow tie?
- Shoes square or pointed, spats?
- Hair short or long?
- Beard and/or moustache style?

# Uniforms

- If uniform, Army or Navy?
- Dress or service uniform?
- Reserve or full time?
- Cap or other headgear?
- Regimental badges on cap?
- Regimental badges sleeve, or tunic?
- Insignia of rank of sleeves, shoulder?
- Medals or medal ribbons on chest?
- Belts, tassels, swords, guns, pouches?
- Puttees and boots, cavalry boots, spurs?

# The Occasion being Celebrated?

- Christening?
- Girls' "coming of age" at 18 or 21?
- 21st or other Birthday, flowers/jewellery?
- School, college or work event?
- Engagement (spot the ring), maybe girl only?
- Wedding or anniversary (beware assumptions)?
- Mourning, generally females?
- Going off to war photo of the service man/woman?
- Going off to war photo of the wife/family for the service man/woman?



# How are People arranged?

- How are the individuals grouped?
- Which are sitting and which standing?
- What are the relative ages of the sitters?
- Who is in the centre of the photo?
- Who are standing behind/alongside whom?
- How are the hands placed - together, around others?
- Are the people smiling, sad or serious?
- Is someone “missing” from the photo (deceased)?
- *N.B. Keeping absolutely still was essential in early photos!*

# Conclusions

- We know the family line of the sitter(s).
- We can estimate the date range of the photo.
- We know the location where it was taken.
- We can guess the class of the sitter(s).
- We can guess the relationship between sitters.
- We can guess a likely occasion.
- Match all the above to individuals in your family tree and you may be able to name the person!

# Remember

**Start with what you  
think you know, prove  
it, then work  
backwards and record  
everything as you go!**



# Happy hunting!

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