

Open a shutter to the past

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A fascinating collection of photographs of Bath and the surrounding villages has come to light in the past few months. Jackie Chappell went to take a look

Photographer George Love Dafnis captured thousands of images of his home town and surrounding area on camera from the turn of the last century onwards.

The end result is a collection of work which moves through the decades from 1904 to 1950. Although the main body of George's work belongs to the period between 1910 and 1930.

The complete collection, owned by George's grandson Peter Dafnis, comprises more than 6,000 glass plate negatives, half of which are images of Bath.

It's currently being digitised by Dan Brown for the online archive Bath in Time.

Dan says: "This has to be the most comprehensive and important collection of its type that exists. It's an interpretation of Victorian and Edwardian history in the city that's recognisable, although so many parts of Bath have changed.

"There are photographs of places bombed in the war such as St James and St Andrews – he didn't know they would be lost so he has captured this bit of history by accident."

Thanks to Peter, the collection has remained in the family all these years, first in a warehouse at the back of the family's grocery store in Batheaston and then, when the business closed in 2000, Peter took them to his home.

He says: "I don't think my father thought that they had any great value, but it was my ambition to try to do something with them.

"My grandfather taught me photography when I was a teenager. I cycled twice a week to see him at his house in 32 Sydney Buildings, where he would be producing postcards on his kitchen table among the Fray Bentos pie tins with the enlarger on the other side of the room. I got quite an insight into the technology."

George sold the postcards to all the local post offices and newsagents and they were – and still are – highly collectable, as they cover such a comprehensive area, including the small surrounding villages.

Dan had discovered that the Dafnis postcards were always interesting and, through contact with a few collectors, had realised that there was a vast output.

He spent several years trying to track the collection down before making contact with Peter. Now Peter comes into Bath twice a week with a few boxes of glass plates and, for the past few months, the two of them have been working together, cataloguing and photographing the original negatives, most of which are in good condition.

Dan says: "The quality of the digital images is astounding. His technique and equipment were pretty good and they are a wonderful record, especially of Bath.

"What's interesting is that they show Bath without traffic or trees.

"We are just starting to learn how George operated. Possibly he went out in the early morning so that the streets were quite clear."

In the early days George, who worked for the Post Office as a telegrapher, cycled to the areas he was interested in and then he became one of the first Bathonians to have a car.

The car is frequently to be seen in the photographs, often with his wife Violet sitting there.

Peter's father, who was one of a pair of twins, also appears quite often, both boys in their King Edward's uniform.

George evidently liked panoramic views but there are also numerous photographs of the big estates around Bath, such as Widcombe Manor, St Catherine's Court and Iford.

Dan says: "It's possible that he received commissions as there are many interior pictures which are fascinating as you can see the interior details of how people lived and the books they were reading.

"There's also an amazing set of photographs showing the building of Monkton Combe railway and some Combe Hay pictures that show the old canal.

"There are even views inside St James – where Boots is now – showing how it looked before it was bombed."

Some 2,000 images from the collection of George Love Dafnis are already online and the rest will be completed over the next few weeks.

There are also plans in the pipeline to mount an exhibition later in the year that will include some of George's photographic equipment, including his tripod, now converted into a lampstand, and a shutter.

Peter says: "I think my grandfather would appreciate it if he knew that his collection was online for everybody to see."

To view the images of George Love Dafnis, visit www.bathintime.co.uk/dafnis

