

THE ENGLAND OF HENRY TAUNT

Victorian Photographer: his Thames. his Oxford. his Home Counties
and Travels. his Portraits. Times and Ephemera

Edited by
Bryan Brown

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Volume 5

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Henry W. Taunt aboard his boat on the river at Oxford in the 1880s, with his camera mounted aloft, from which vantage point he often photographed the University boating events.

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For my Mother

Preface

When I first discovered the work of the Oxford photographer Henry William Taunt, some four years ago, it came as a great surprise to find no published material on either his work or his life. From my reading of contemporary opinion it has become evident that Taunt's work was well respected and popular. The opinion is more than justified for his photographs are outstanding at many levels.

An obituary notice in the *Oxford Chronicle* of 1922 states, 'His lamented death removes a well known figure from Oxford, but his numerous works will form a valuable and standing memorial of his zeal and industry.' It is now fifty years since his death and very little has been done to put Taunt's work into the position of historical importance it so rightly deserves.

Taunt's mastery of photography and his astute sense of scene and composition make him one of the most important but neglected photographers of the last century. Primarily he was a landscape and architectural photographer, but as a keen observer of human nature he took many vivid and characteristic portraits. Perhaps the most important quality of his work is the combination of his talents as artist and social historian, for it provides us with such an enjoyable and informative record of Taunt's age.

To my delight I found a publisher who was of the same opinion as myself and during the last year I have brought together a selection of photographs which conveys a proper sense of Taunt's quality – a quality which I have tried to evoke in the design of the book and the presentation of the photographs in sepia, the colour faithful to Taunt's original conception. I have grouped the photographs into seven main sections, which cover the nature and scope of Taunt's work. First, there is his great love, the Thames; second, Oxford, the place of his birth and death; third, the neighbouring counties to which he frequently travelled; fourth, the places which he visited further afield; fifth, his splendid portraits; sixth, a cross-section of his work in which we can see the images of life of a hundred years ago; and finally, a selection of his humorous and entertaining ephemera. As an introduction to this selection of photographs and to help the reader to put Taunt's life and work into its historical perspective, I have related a little of his character, his history and surroundings and said something about the photographic methods and equipment which Taunt used in the pursuit of his art and craft.

Oxford

Bryan Brown



1 'Camping out in a quiet corner'. This shows Taunt's tented boat prepared for one of his river trips, which sometimes lasted three months. The photograph was taken near Barford Mill on the Avon.

Introduction

Henry William Taunt is an almost perfect example of a true Victorian character. His life is full of all the richness, idiosyncrasy and contradiction associated with the reign which covered the greater part of his life. Primarily a photographer, he was also a sound businessman of real enterprise. He never made a fortune, but he developed his establishment, Henry W. Taunt and Company, to a considerable size and ran it successfully for over fifty years. He was a writer and antiquarian of great enthusiasm, writing over fifty books, publishing and printing many of them himself. He was an entertainer, travelling near and far with his magic lantern and slides of his own making. As a musician, he wrote a revised edition of the National Anthem, several political songs and jingles. As a politician he took a keen interest in the affairs of the nation and of the city of Oxford. Official of the Ancient Order of Druids and of the Foresters' Friendly Society, churchman, organist, naturalist, cartographer – there seems little to which he did not turn his hand.

Early Years

Taunt was born on the evening of 14 June 1842 in Pensons Gardens, St Ebbe's, Oxford. Victoria had been on the throne since 1837 and the idea of an Empire was beginning to form. It was the age of the adventurer, the 'Jack of all Trades', the man of energy and enterprise, the character that Taunt so fully embodied. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was to herald the popularization of photography and ten years later, in 1861, the number of commercial photographers had grown from 51 to over 2,500. Such was the competition that Taunt was to face. Oxford business was no less hectic. Life revolved around the University which supported the majority of the working population and many trades and businesses.

Taunt's birth coincided with the introduction of daguerreotypes to England. In 1841 the studios of Richard Beard and Antoine Claudet had been established in London and that of William Constable in Brighton. He was born into a world where a new invention and art form was at the beginning of its most fruitful development, a development in which he was to play his part.

This, however, was a far cry from Pensons Gardens. The Taunts were certainly not wealthy. But they were respected and respectable Victorian citizens. His father was a plumber, glazier and painter with a small business in nearby Bridge Street. Taunt passed most of his young life in the St Ebbe's area, spending his holidays at West Ilsley in the Berkshire Downs, where his mother's parents lived. He recalled the local children, the village school and a schoolmistress whom he liked.

Life was hard for a working-class family in the 1840s, when boys had to begin work young to help support the family. Taunt seems to have received little formal education. He was taught at a church school in St Ebbe's, at West Ilsley and at Evesham in Worcestershire where

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the family had relations. By the time he was ten he was working for an established Oxford tailor, James Embling of 23 High Street. It was here, in the back of the shop, that Taunt started to read and sometimes paint in watercolours. His wages were four shillings per week. He soon moved on and had further jobs in 'the High' – the hub of Oxford business in the mid-nineteenth century.

His second job was with Henry Ladd, a stationer and newsagent at 10 High Street. Taunt recalled, 'The chief duties were to keep three different sets of customers going with the *Times*, lent to read. Each was supposed to have their paper one hour, but there was no margin of time allowed between to effect the change, and this led into endless difficulties, particularly as some customers wanted to crib more than their time sometimes.'

His next job was with Charles Richards, the High Street bookshop and auctioneers mentioned in Cuthbert Bede's Oxford novel, *The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green* (1853). Here undergraduates sold off the belongings collected during term-time. Taunt relates how Oxford business was dependent on the students and that they were bad at paying their debts:

There's the story of Joy, the tailor, of Park Street – a man named Heaviness of Wadham owed him an a/c, and was leaving at the end of term. Joy got into the college and caught him. His client received him most graciously, asked him to sit down, told him he was arranging to pay everybody tomorrow, and if Joy would call at 10 in the morning, he would find himself all right. Joy, of course, was delighted as the bill was a heavy one. He went at 10 sharp, went up to the man's room and found him gone. But a note lay on the table addressed: 'Mr Joy with Mr Heaviness' compliments'. He opened it. Inside was a long slip of paper like a cheque, but instead of the magic, 'Pay Mr Joy', it contained these words: 'Heaviness endureth for a night and Joy cometh in the morning'. Too bad.

Enters Photography

At the age of fourteen, in 1856, Taunt made an all-important move and took a job with Edward Bracher, photographic artist of 26 High Street. In the development of Bracher's studio is the early history of photography in Oxford. Bracher, like many of the photographers working in the 1850s, was concerned mostly with portraits and commissioned landscapes. Taunt's reminiscences give us a clear picture of what a typical photographer's studio was like:

It was a poor little place, with a very narrow staircase lit with a gasjet in one place and very steep up; first to the specimen room into which everybody was asked, then into the dressing

room above that, and lastly up into the gallery. None of the rooms were large enough to swing round the proverbial cat, but Dons and Laity and Ladies and Gentlemen of every class all made their way up these squeaking stairs to be Daguerrotyped at £2.2.0 a time at first, or later to have Positives (pictures on Glass) taken and put into Passepartouts and framed in gaudy ornamental frames.

The daguerreotype that Taunt mentions was the first successful photographic process, introduced in 1839 by the Frenchman Louis Daguerre, whereby the photographic image was made on the surface of a metal plate. The limitation of this method was that only one image was achieved; the client had to be satisfied with his portrait on a unique and beautiful silvered plate. The daguerreotype was superseded by the wet collodion process, made available in 1851 by Frederick Scott Archer, where the picture was taken on a glass plate. This was a great breakthrough as negatives were made and many paper prints could be taken from the original, or the plate could be used as a positive by backing it with dark material thus imitating the daguerreotype. Paper negatives (calotypes) had been produced in the 1840s by Fox Talbot and others, but had many disadvantages. So the advent of the wet collodion process marked the beginning of photography as we know it today. These techniques had created a demand for photographs in the home, and Bracher's studio supplied both *cartes-de-visite* for the family album and stereoscopic cards which were used in the drawing-room viewer. *Cartes-de-visite* were little portraits on a mount the size of a visiting card (Plate 166b), and stereoscopic views were two prints of the same view, taken at a slightly different angle, mounted together on card; viewed through a stereoscope there was a three-dimensional illusion (Plate 63).

Inside the studio the client went through a harassing experience. Sitting in a fixed position, neck in a neck clamp, for the long exposure, one had to suffer the smell of the chemicals and the temperament of the photographer. Nevertheless, Bracher, like many of the early photographers, found business brisk and profitable. While Bracher himself looked after the shop, Taunt began as a utility hand, polishing silvered plates for daguerreotypes or cleaning glass for positives, tasks calling for great care and scrupulous cleanliness. In 1858, at the tender age of sixteen, Taunt was to graduate to the status of photographer. Bracher gave him responsibility for the outdoor work and he began taking stereoscopic views and small groups. It was during this period that Taunt developed his interest in the Thames. Some of his finest photographs of the river were taken in the 1860s, when in his late teens and early twenties. They were taken purely for himself, and show a remarkable awareness of his newly-learned techniques in recording the landscape which he had grown to love.

However, profits from the collodion work were much less than on daguerreotypes and Bracher sold his business. The turnover in photographers at this time was considerable, many taking it up for a quick profit and practising in the simplest of premises. Yet Taunt thrived in such a competitive environment. In 1863, the year of his marriage, Taunt took the job as photographic manager to Wheeler & Day, the stationers to whom Bracher sold his business. Here he learnt more of accountancy and the general know-how of trading, a useful training for his own photographic business, which he started in 1868 at 67 George Street, Oxford. The following year, aged twenty-seven, he moved to new premises at 33 Cornmarket Street, a shop previously occupied by another Oxford photographer.

His work at this time was mostly concerned with *cartes-de-visite* and stereoscopic cards. But he soon developed a series of 'Shilling Views' of Oxford, the Thames and the surrounding countryside. The *Oxford Times* of 23 January 1869 praised his enterprise: 'We have inspected many of these views and have found them most faithful and artistic. All the impressions which we examined were exquisite and evidently most carefully executed.'

Taking a Photograph

It can help us to appreciate the quality of Taunt's work if we understand something about the actual labour of taking a photograph by the wet collodion method. One can imagine Taunt on the river. Precariously positioned in mid-stream, his head shrouded by a black cloth, steadying the heavy camera and bulky tripod, he was ready to capture the scene. The glass plate had to be kept wet the whole time, and outdoors a dark tent was needed for processing the plates on the spot, as we can see in Plate 9. So Taunt had to carry bottles of chemicals, developing dishes and other paraphernalia to produce his negatives. The quality and detail in his work is not so much due to the lens but to his dexterity in handling the plate and chemicals, and his understanding of the qualities and effects of light, for exposures could vary from five seconds to as long as two minutes. At this time photography could be a hit-or-miss procedure. The long exposure had some strange effects, as in the lovely photograph of Putney Bridge (Plate 52), where we can see the movement of water whilst the bridge and background are sharp. In fact it was possible for someone to walk quickly across a scene being photographed without appearing at all in the photograph itself!

The process was not always complete at the negative stage and many early photographers had various tricks when making their prints. One of Taunt's favourite techniques with a rather bleak-looking scene was to add a dramatic sky. He kept a stock of special sky negatives for this very purpose; an example of this is Plate 17. Another trick was the