

Guide to the Negatives of Thomas Ralph William Howell b: 1911 d: 2007

1. Thomas Ralph William Howell photographer and entrepreneur

Thomas Howell's parents lived at Warmington, near Oundle. Thomas trained as a chemist and an ophthalmologist and for a while operated a mobile service as a travelling optician visiting local villages in the Oundle area. He came to Cambridge and by 1939 was living with his wife Rose Isobel, Nee Burdis, at 69 Windsor Road, Cambridge. Thomas was interested in photography; taking photographs and developing and printing. He set up a darkroom upstairs at No 69, at a time when film and chemicals were difficult to obtain. By around 1944 to 1948 Thomas operated part time as a professional photographer. He undertook commercial photography for local estate agents Carter Jonas, photographing interiors and exteriors of large houses, but his speciality, when shortages made photography difficult, seemed to be snapshots of families and children taken in their back gardens, to be sent to their loved ones, including those who were incarcerated in POW camps overseas. He marketed his services via the Cambridge YMCA. Thomas also took photographs of prisoners of war and staff at British POW camps in the UK at Royston and Trumpington.

By the mid 1940s Thomas had joined the Cambridge firm of A Sidney Campkin and Sons, then run by Francis Sidney Campkin, who was also becoming increasingly interested in photography. Campkin had their shop at No 11 Rose Crescent Cambridge, and had a pedigree back to 1800 when the firm was started by an Apothecary called William Brewster. Between 1944 and 1945 the firm changed focus from "chemists and opticians" to "chemists, opticians and photographic dealers" and by 1946 Thomas was the partner of Francis Sidney Campkin, who continued to be associated with the firm until his death in 1955.



Thomas Howell in the darkroom, 1940s

Thomas moved his darkroom to 11 Rose Crescent and A Sidney Campkin and Son, in their 1945 "Cambridge Almanac" (a free annual publication produced by the firm from 1875 to 1948 to advertise their Cambridge remedies and other services) stated that they were undertaking "Developing and printing from spools and superb enlarging from your best negatives. Bring all photographic work and enquiries to us".

By 1946 they were offering "expert photographic advice" and promised that "full stocks of bromide and gaslight papers would soon be available as soon as "present quota restrictions permit". They urged those interested in photography to join the Cambridge Photographic Club, of which Thomas Howell was a member.

By 1947 they stated "our own developing and printing service carried on at 11 Rose Crescent, is the quickest quality service obtainable in Cambridge". In Campkin's 1948 Cambridge Almanack Thomas had written an article "Introducing photography" and two of his photographs (depicting Kings College and the Round Church) made up the publication's centre spread.

Thomas Howell was a very effective entrepreneur and grew his business from a single chemist's and optician's shop to a modern technical firm employing around 100 staff with shops and studios in Cambridge, Peterborough, Lincoln, London and Dublin. As the Campkin photographic business grew so Thomas became more involved in the management of the business and less in his own commercial photography activities. But he was certainly taking some photographs in the 1990s and a photograph he took of Concorde at the Farnborough Air Display he made into a postcard commemorating the aircraft going out of service (the postcard sold well). Thomas Howell's companies included British Trade Equipment Ltd, Campkin's Ophthalmic Opticians Ltd, Campkin's Camera Centre Ltd, KP Professional Sales Ltd, and Anglia Photoworks Ltd . Some of Campkin's enterprises which were individually listed as photographers in local trade directories are listed on the www.fadingimages.uk site. Other Cambridge shops were at 1 and 11 Rose Crescent, Kings Parade and Market Street (Premises formerly occupied by photographer Ralph Lord).

2. Provenance – how these negatives came into the Cambridgeshire Collection

When Thomas's second wife, Sybil, died in 2017 a number of negatives were found at their home at Sandalwood, Ely Road, Waterbeach and were deposited with the Cambridgeshire Collection by their finders and owners, Tom Johnson and Les Waters.

3. How the collection is stored

This collection comprises approximately 5,300 negatives and 350 prints.

The negatives are stored as follows.

Box C (Commercial work). Box contains cards; each card contains negatives in glassine packet. There is a list of cards and their subjects with the box

Box Y (Cambridge and District YMCA), Box contains cards; each card contains negatives in glassine packet. There is a list of cards and their subjects with the box

Box W (Warmington and District), Box contains cards; each card contains negatives in glassine packet. There is a list of cards and their subjects with the box

Box O (Own personal) negatives Box contains cards, each card contains negatives in glassine packet. There is a list of cards and their subjects with the box

So for example describing the location of negatives in these boxes TH/C/3/ would be a negative in Box C in the packet attached to Card 3

Books 1 – 8 negative books, each containing numbered pockets in most of which are one or more individual negatives. An index of subjects is usually in the front of the book.

Packets 9 and 10 are envelopes containing miscellaneous negatives

So for example a negative in book 8, pocket 6 would be TH/8/6/

Print packets 1-4, contain miscellaneous prints.

For example a print in print packet 2 would be TH/Print2/

4. TH Index

An index has been prepared in an excel spreadsheet listing each negative, its location, any associated text and a brief description of the image portrayed. The spreadsheet can be downloaded from www.fadingimages.uk/thnegs.pdf, a 0.9 mb .pdf file

5. What you might hope to find in this collection

These negatives are a rich mix of commercial and personal family photographs. There are a number of Cambridge weddings and individual and group portraits in this collection. Many of the portraits are family groups shot in natural light often in back gardens. There are some shots of stage productions. There are also houses, local views and some events. There generally date from the 1940s / 50s. Search the spreadsheet for names, addresses and subjects of interest.

6. Handling negatives

The staff will fetch a box or book or packet of negatives or prints for you. You will then need to find the negatives you want in the box book or packet.

Negatives are very delicate and need to be handled with care, touching only the edges of the negative rather than the image area. Cambridgeshire Collection staff will give you guidance on this and will provide you with an A4 plastic sleeve which will enable you to handle a negative without leaving your finger marks on it. Ideally, if you know you will be handling a lot of negatives, you might wish to go equipped, taking along some white cotton or powder free vinyl gloves to wear (gloves are not provided by the Cambridgeshire Collection).

7. Ordering copies of images

If your search has been positive you will want to order a scan or a positive print. If you are searching for a portrait hoping to recognise a facial likeness, you will find this extremely difficult to establish by looking at a reversed negative image. To study a portrait visually you really need to order up a scanned positive of the image.

Photographic and scanning charges and processing times are shown on the Cambridgeshire Collection's website:

http://www4.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/info/20011/archives_archaeology_and_museums/177/archives_and_local_studies/6

8. Use of images

If you intend to use the image you are ordering in a publication or on a website or for other purposes than private personal use, then you should discuss this with staff when ordering copies. Generally, for smaller less commercial purposes, the Cambridgeshire Collection will waive reproduction charges in return for an appropriate acknowledgement and a copy of the final publication for their collection.

9. The future of the collection

Hopefully at some future stage more information will come to light about Thomas's relationship with the Cambridge YMCA, which is linked with some of the portrait work. Perhaps Thomas advertised his services through the YMCA, or had a discount scheme for their members.

10. Feedback

Staff would welcome any suggestions for improvement of this guide

11. Notes and references.

Thomas Howell and Campkins are listed at <http://www.fadingimages.uk/photoHo.asp> and <http://www.fadingimages.uk/photoCa.asp>

See also the podcast by Tom Johnson, a fellow Director at Campkins at <http://www.fadingimages.uk/TJpodcast.asp>

The Cambridgeshire Collection holds a set of "A Sidney Campkin's Cambridge Almanacks" from the 1890s to 1948

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