

A Guide to Negatives from Stearn and Sons Photographers, Cambridge

1. Background to Stearn and Sons Photographers

Thomas Stearn (b: 1825 Bloomsbury Middlesex, d: 1905), a Cambridge tailor, founded this firm of photographers around 1866. Later he ran the firm with his wife Eliza Louisa (born Cotterell) b:1829 Poplar, d:1892, trading as "Mr and Mrs Stearn". Later still he took his sons Frank b:1856, Harry Cotterell b:1860, and Walter James b:1865 into the business, trading as Messrs Stearn and later as Stearn and Sons. After Thomas died the business was run by his sons. Harry Cotterell Stearn died in 1906. Another son, Gilbert Stearn b:1866, was involved in the business at least until 1917. Walter James Stearn died in 1929. Thomas's niece, Edith F Stearn b:1875 Winchester, d:1950, was also involved with the firm. Stearn's operated throughout at 72 Bridge Street Cambridge, narrowly avoiding the loss of their premises in a fire in their darkroom in 1898. From 1908 to 1920 local directories also listed premises at Brunswick Terrace Cambridge. At some point between 1939 and 1943 the firm was taken over by AH Leach and Son, a well established and growing photo processing business based at Brighouse in Yorkshire. A new limited company, Stearn and Sons (Cambridge) Ltd, was formed in April 1943, neither the shareholders nor the Directors were from the Stearn family. During the period 1942 to 1950 the firm's processing work was done by AH Leach in Brighouse. In 1966 AH Leach was taken over by an advertising company, Hunting Surveys, until the Leach family bought the business back from them in 1999. From 1968 the new company, Stearn and Sons (Cambridge) Ltd, did not trade on their own account but acted as agents of their holding companies. In 1970 the Cambridge firm joined Eaden Lilley's photographers.



The firm's premises at 72 Bridge Street Cambridge in the 1940s (Cambridgeshire Collection).

Over the years the firm produced portraits, souvenir views of Cambridge (cartes de visite, stereo cards and later postcards) and undertook a lot of University and college work, including sporting and other societies, groups, sports and other events, especially rowing and the May Bumps, as well as University degree days. When Walter James Stearn died he was described in his obituary as a “successful University Sporting Photographer”. The firm even had its own little wooden studio at Grassy Corner Fen Ditton, built in 1882 by Thomas Stearn, which was used for portraits of rowers and their supporters at the races.

2. Survival of the firm’s negatives.

During and shortly after WW2 the firm’s films were processed by and stored at the premises of AH Leach in Brighouse West Yorkshire. This could have been in order to avoid possible air raid damage, or as a matter of economic necessity – as they would probably have lost staff to the armed forces as happened to them in WW1. Or the arrangement could have been the result of rationalising work between parent and subsidiary companies. After the firm finally merged with Eaden Lilley in 1970 their old negatives were destroyed, but those stored away from Cambridge still survived and were deposited in the Cambridgeshire Collection at the Cambridge Central Library in 1977.

The surviving negatives are dated between 1942 and 1950. It is estimated that this collection numbers some 7000+ images, making it the third largest photographic collection within the Cambridgeshire Collection (Post Office Terrace and Lilian Ream collections are larger)



*Stearn negatives
at Brighouse
Yorks in 1977*



Ready for transporting back to the Cambridgeshire Collection in an Eaden Lilley van 1977

3. How these negatives are stored and organised

The Stearn negatives are stored in some 400 card boxes (used originally for photographic paper) in which they arrived at the Cambridgeshire collection. Boxes vary in size and are mainly 9 x 12 in and 12 x 14in and about 1 inch deep. On arrival at the Cambridgeshire Collection each box was given a consecutive SN (Stearn Negative) box number, SN1 – SN399. Boxes were numbered in sequence in no particular order.

Inside each box is a mix of different sizes and types of negative, roughly between 12 and 25 negatives per box. Some are on glass, mainly 10 x 8 in, 8.5 x 6.5 in and 3.25 x 4.25 in, some are on acetate, again in different sizes. Individual items are wrapped in paper or in waxed envelopes on which the firm has written a classification, a number and some minimal information about the subject.

Cambridgeshire Collection staff have kept the negatives in the boxes in which they are packed and have listed every item in every box on the SN Card Index.

4. Classification of negatives

Within the boxes, each negative has been given, by the firm, a negative classification which refers to its subject, and a unique negative number.

Originally the firm must have operated some sort of day book or card index listing customer details and print orders relative to the negative numbers. Unfortunately nothing of this nature has survived. Also most of the prints produced by Stearn would have had the list of individuals depicted in beautiful calligraphy on the mount. Sadly no information about individuals within group photographs has survived with these negatives.

Below is the classification the firm used and the numbers of negatives they recorded in each classification.

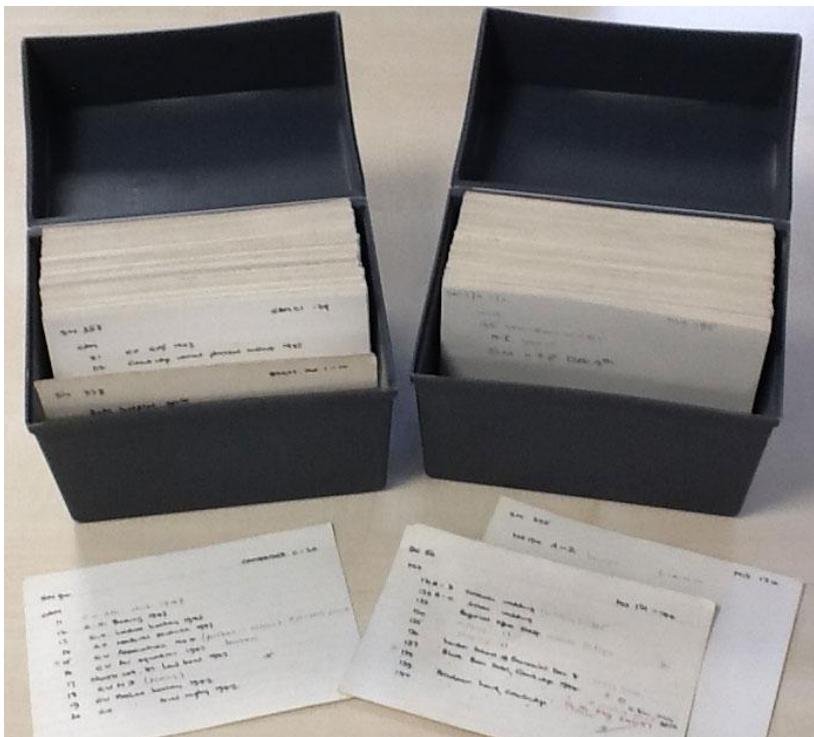
Classification	Neg Nos	Subject
Barts.Hos	1-10	Barts Hospital groups
CAM	1 – 801	Cambridge University subjects, Cambridge university societies, Cambridge University department groups, works groups etc
CAT	61-74	St Catharine's College, societies, year groups etc
CH	30-82	Christ's College societies, year groups etc
CL	11-86	Clare College societies, year groups etc
CO	50-74	Corpus Christi College societies, year groups etc
DO	61-149	Downing College societies, year groups etc
EM	1-186	Emmanuel College societies, year groups etc
FEL	1-502	Felsted School societies, year groups etc. These refer to Felsted School, Felsted, Essex, CM6 3LL
FIT	15-29	Fitzwilliam College societies, year groups etc
GC	21-59	Gonville and Caius College societies, year groups etc
HYC	1- 462	Haileybury College School societies, year groups etc. These are from Haileybury & Imperial Service College, Hertford Heath, Hertfordshire SG13 7NU
JE	1- 316	Jesus College societies, year groups etc
JO	71-124	St John's College societies, year groups etc
KI	14-24	Kings College societies, year groups etc
LMC	49-124	Lady Margaret College societies, year groups etc
M	11-119	Military groups and subjects
MAG	31-135	Magdalene College societies, year groups etc
MIS	11-1406	Miscellaneous subjects, includes weddings, bumps races, firm's groups, London School of Economics groups, school groups, golden wedding parties, (evacuated from London) graves, funerals, degree days, social clubs, college domestic staff, scouts, degree days, University Press groups, dinners, Cottenham Salvation Army groups
PEM	1-20	Pembroke College societies, year groups etc
Perse School	54-67	Perse School groups
QU	41-135	Queens College societies, year groups etc
SEL	11-72	Selwyn College societies, year groups etc
SID	42	Sidney Sussex College societies, year groups etc
THC	1-139	Trinity Hall societies, year groups etc
TRI	1-49	Trinity College societies, year groups etc
W	1-81	Weddings
WCT	1-10	Westcott House societies, year groups etc

Some of the individual numbered items refer to multiple negatives; in which case individual negatives have a suffix letter A to Z.

Some of these sequences start with a number higher than one, and in some sequences intermediate numbers are recorded as missing. The reason for this is that the classification and numbers for each item are as received in the boxes from the donors. It would be reasonable to assume that each negative was entered into a day book at the photographers in numerical sequence, but only those requiring prints or further work were sent to or retained at Brighthouse.

SN Card index

Around 600 6 x 4 inch index cards make up the SN Card Index, stored in two grey card index boxes, arranged in alphabetical order by Classification and negative order, cross referencing these to the SN box numbers.



The SN Card Index

SN Classification Lists

There are two sets of SN classification lists filed in the Illustrations ring binders.

SN Subject Classification List - A 13 page list is devoted to listing subjects and relating these back to Classification and negative no.

For example, the Cambridge University Pharaohs Club appears in this listing. This gives the reference MIS 853 A – E. The SN card index then lists MIS 853 A – E and shows they are in box SN 76.

SN Illustrations classification list - There is also a 30 page Classification List which relates the subjects of the negatives to the main illustrations classification scheme in the Cambridgeshire Collection listed below:

A General views / Aerial Views

Cambridge City

B Streets
C Private Houses (named) and Domestic Objects
D University Buildings
E Colleges
F Libraries and Museums
G Schools (including non-university colleges)
H Hospitals and Almshouses
I Public Buildings
J Commons, Parks, Sports Grounds etc.
K Water (including rivers, lakes, bridges, locks and conduits)
L Monuments, Crosses etc.
M Churches and Places of Worship
N Club and Society Buildings, including Masonic & Political
O Inns, Hotels etc.
P Commerce and Industry

City and County

Q	Transport	R	People and Groups
S	Events	T	Costume
U	Sports and Games	V	Traditions and Customs
W	County Topics	X	Advertisements
Y	Villages, Towns and Country Seats		

For example Classification H is for hospitals, and under this is listed MIS1363 A-F Addenbrookes Ball 1949 and MIS 1391A-M Addenbrookes Hospital Lilac Times Ball . The SN Card index shows these items are in boxes SN 15 and SN173 respectively.

These two classification lists are works in progress; extensive, but not comprehensive. They are strongly focussed on the CAM and MIS classifications, but even these are not complete.

5. Stearn's Postcards

The Cambridgeshire Collection has four albums of Stearn's postcards. F07.1004, F07.1005, F071006 and LS D09.0203. Pasted into these albums are real photograph postcards, generally with a copyright notice with Stearn's name on the face. The albums were probably prepared to be used by a firm's representative to take orders from clients. The albums appear to date from the 1940s and 1950s and cover mainly Cambridge and Cambridgeshire villages and towns. The albums are likely to be part of a sales initiative by AH Leach. In F07.1006 are several sepia cards with Newmarket views, published by Lilywhite Ltd, another company owned by AH Leach. The price list below is included inside the front cover of F07.1004

Size	code	Price per gross	Price per gross mixed
Court Size	LC	33/6	41/-
Small size	CC	30/6	33/6
Colour	CS	31/6	34/6

A handwritten list of 367 of Stearn's postcards from these albums is in the Cambridgeshire Collection Illustrations ring binder. The postcards in the larger album LS D09.0203 use photographs taken by Frank Kenworthy who was the local manager at Stearns.

6. Addition of some images to the main Cambridgeshire Illustrations catalogue.

Where images from this collection have been added to the main illustrations card index, a note of the classification has been added to the SN card index

7. What you might hope to find in this collection

This collection is only useful if you are looking for photographs from Cambridge for the period 1942 to 1950. You will find many photographs of teams, departmental staff, clubs and societies at University, and college level. There are also many photographs of rowing and the "bumps" on the Cam. The classification list above shows the colleges where the firm got its business. There are some negatives which can be linked to family weddings in and around Cambridge during this period. There are a few groups of individuals evacuated to Cambridge from elsewhere. There are extensive group photographs from Felstead School, Essex, and Haileybury College School in Hertfordshire. There are some group photographs of groups evacuated to Cambridge during the war from London.

Although most of these negatives depict people, there are very few where there is any information to identify individuals. You may know that your ancestor was at a certain college where he played rugby in 1944, and you may be lucky enough to find a photograph of the college rugby 1st XV for that year, but you will not, from this collection alone, be able to pinpoint your ancestor, even if he is in the photograph.

If you are looking for something other than college or University subjects it may be worth going through the index cards for the CAM (Cambridge) or MIS (Miscellaneous) categories. You may find wedding groups in the MIS or W categories which include surname and date.

The collection is a good source for contemporary clothing and grooming from the period 1942-50.

In any case, ask the staff for the Stearn's classification lists and index cards to search for subjects you require.

8. Handling negatives

If you request any of Stearn's negatives, the staff will fetch a box of SN negatives. You will then need to find the negatives you want in the box or packet.

While most of these negatives are in very good condition, some are deteriorating with the emulsion and image coming away from the glass or acetate support – these will be destroyed if not handled with extreme care.

Negatives are very delicate and glass negatives have sharp edges. They 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 non slip powder free vinyl gloves to wear. (gloves are not provided by the Cambridgeshire Collection).

9. 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_museum_s/177/archives_and_local_studies/6

10. Use of images from the Cambridgeshire Collection

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.

11. The future of the collection

If the SN index cards could be transcribed into a database or spreadsheet then searching this collection would be greatly improved and this should result in greater use of the collection.

An assessment of the condition of negatives should be undertaken to assess the cost / benefit of an exercise to scan any negatives which are deteriorating to the extent that they will shortly be lost.

12. Feedback

Staff would welcome any suggestions for improvement of this guide

13. Notes and References

Cambridge Daily News 11 June 1898 – fire at premises

Cambridge Independent Press 8 Sept 1905 death of Thomas Stearn

Cambridge Daily News 8 Feb 1906 – death of Harry Cotterell Stearn

Cambridge Daily News 4 Feb 1929 - death of Walter James Stearn

Cambridge Daily News 9 Mar 1968 – merger of AH Leach and Hunting Surveys, effects on Stearn and Sons Cambridge

Cambridge Daily News 9 Oct 1970 - merger with Eaden Lilley photography department.

Cambridge Evening News 14/1/1995 Stearn's wooden studio at Fen Ditton being re-built

Leach - website - history of the firm <https://weareleach.com/#ourHistory>

Companies House archived documents of Company No 00379878

www.fadingimages.uk/photoSt.asp has a more detailed history of the firm and examples of their work.

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