

EDWIN PECKHAM (1887-1972) - the Stroud photographer

by Mike Cooke

Whilst photography dates back to Fox Talbot and the early 1840s, it was not until around 1890 that the Kodak camera and daylight loading roll film came along. Light meters followed soon after. These technical developments made photography much simpler for the amateur, so enabling it to become a popular hobby in many households, and creating many business opportunities. As a result, demand increased dramatically for photographic services to the public as well as to commerce and industry.

Having been born in 1887, Edwin Peckham would have grown up in this new era. As a young man he was probably intrigued by this burgeoning technology, and saw photography as offering a glamorous and exciting career. His father was a shopkeeper. The scene was set, which led him to devote his working life to running his photographic business in Stroud for 40 years between 1919 and 1959.

HIS EARLY DAYS IN CIRENCESTER

Edwin Peckham came from Cirencester, just 12 miles to the east of Stroud. His parents had moved there in the late 1870s. His father John had come from Lymington in Hampshire, and his mother Mary was born in Gillingham, Kent.¹ They were married in the Cirencester Parish Church on 23 July 1879.²

Edwin was the youngest of their three surviving children. He was born on 18 November 1887, whilst they were living at 42 Dollar Street.³ John was working as a butcher's assistant at the time, but soon afterwards in 1889 he took over the butcher's shop at 21 Cricklade Street which he ran until 1911.⁴ Ill-health led to his premature retirement, the lease to the shop being sold to Thomas Shilham (senior). (The shop continued within this family until 1984, when it was demolished during redevelopment of that part of the street. The late 1930s saw it being renumbered to 30).

We know little about Peckham's school days, although he must have been quite gifted. At the age of 12 years, he was admitted to the newly built Grammar School (19 Jan 1900)⁵ soon after it had opened. His artistic bent showed early; a freehand drawing of his was displayed at an Industrial, Art and Loan Exhibition held in the Corn Hall between 12 and 21 November 1901.⁶

Like the rest of the family, he became an active member of the Congregational Church in Dyer Street. The church magazine records that the Sunday school teachers, members of the Choir and Guild organised a farewell social for him on the 23 January 1908 in order to thank him for his contributions to these three activities⁷. At it they presented him with a dressing case and a small timepiece.

Where Peckham went then is not certain, but probably he spent at least some of this time in London. According to the local newspaper reporting on his retirement, "He commenced photographic work as an apprentice about 50 years ago and had further training with the Court photographers Lafayette, of Old Bond Street, amongst others".⁸ Although this implies that he did his apprenticeship whilst in his early 20s, it is likely that he started photography much earlier.

Two years later he was back in Cirencester. We read that he had just taken over as conductor of the church choir.⁹ His involvement with the church must have continued for several more years, because in 1912 he was being complimented for teaching the children and conducting the church's Sunday School Anniversary Day Service on 16 June.¹⁰

Singing was another of his accomplishments. He is listed as being in the men's chorus of the Cirencester Choral Society for performances of *The Mikado* and *The Belle of Brittany* at the Bingham Hall on the 6-9 April 1910¹¹ and 10-13 April 1912,¹² respectively. And, on the 14 December 1911, he took part in an *Evening with Dickens* at the Church, when he along with five others sang a selection of songs and carols.¹³

HE SETTLES IN STROUD

The newspaper report on his retirement in 1959 noted that "Mr. Peckham came to Stroud in 1919 following service during the First World War in both the R.N.A.S. and the R.A.F. His first studio was beneath the old Picture House (now Burtons, tailors)".

Contemporary local directories bear out that he started as a commercial photographer in Stroud around 1919.¹⁴ Initially, he went into partnership with Wilfred Dennis Moss, who had a thriving photographic business in Cirencester (at the Gainsborough House Studio, 8 Castle Street). The 1920 *Stroud and Mid Gloucester Directory* gave King Street as their address, which is in the centre of the town. It was where the old Picture House was located, and where, according to a friend of the family, Peckham continued with his music.¹⁵ He was a good pianist, and would earn some extra money as an accompanist for the silent movies being shown at the cinema.

At this time Peckham was lodging at Acre House in Acre Street on the east side of the town.¹⁶ Then in 1921 he married Lillias Myfannwy Jenks in North Wales,¹⁷ she was a Welsh girl from Llanfyllin, Montgomery.¹⁸ (He had met Lillias whilst in the southeast of England during the war).¹⁹ They went to live at The Firs, Cainscross Road for a couple of years until they moved to 10 Russell Street, when Peckham took over the shop with its photographic business. Their only child, Diana, was born in 1926,²⁰ while they were living 'over the shop' for a number of years.

In 1936 they went to live at Paganhill Lodge, Downfield Road in Cainscross for about a year before moving into their brand new house at Coplands, 1 Folly Lane just to the north of the town centre.²¹ They lived there until around 1964 when they moved away to Westcliffe-on-Sea, Essex to be near to their daughter.

HIS PHOTOGRAPHIC BUSINESS

The photographic business at 10 Russell Street was well established. There had been one there since the building had been erected in 1893. Initially, it had been run by the photographer John H. Elliot up to around 1902. Then in 1902 Henry J. Comley took it over, and renamed the premises as The County Studio. He became well known locally, and continued until about 1919 when he sold out to Ernest O. Reynolds.

By 1923/4 Moss and Peckham had moved there from King Street. A contemporary advertisement in the *Stroud and Mid Gloucester Directory*²² indicates that Peckham was running the business on his own, although Moss's name continues to appear in some local directories until 1929. Peckham was now seeking a much wider customer base. He advertised widely, promoting himself as an "Industrial and Commercial Specialist" as well doing private work (portraiture and weddings) and providing supplies and services to amateur photographers.²³

Early adverts of his in the 1920s read "When You Think of Photographs Think of Edwin C. Peckham. Portraits - Commercial Work Professional Service for Amateurs Modern Well Equipped Department for All Amateur Developing and Printing - 24 Hour Service".²⁴ Another advert, a decade later, highlights "All Amateur Supplies and Service Cine Supplies - Kodascope, Pathescope, etc".²⁵

According to the local newspaper reporting on his retirement, Peckham was for over 20 years a Fellow of the Institute of British Photographers, and twice he was president of its West of England Centre. During his 40 years of business in the town, he photographed "in the region of 5,000 weddings - in many cases two generations". He produced postcards, which he sold from the shop. The subjects range from specific buildings,

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COUNTY STUDIO, STROUD
PHONE 106.

Stroud and Mid-Gloucester Directory 1933

like churches, to more general views taken in the town, as well as of local villages and in the surrounding countryside.

Peckham did a lot of work also for local businesses and industry, often taking photographs of their buildings, equipment, machinery and products to be used by the firms in their publicity. An example is the one, taken by him in the late 1950s, of the works of Hillier's Bacon Curing Company at Newmarket by Nailsworth.²⁶ More accessible are his photographs of local views used as illustrations in contemporary local guides, including the *Official Guides* of Stroud, Chalford, Painswick and the Golden Valley, and the guides to the local churches of St Mary's, Painswick and the Dominican Church and Priory at Woodchester.²⁷ He was always on the lookout for opportunities to record local events – like the spontaneous celebrations on VE Day in Stroud at the end of WW2, and a few years earlier in January 1940, when the rain froze and covered everything with a coating of ice causing a lot of damage to vegetation.²⁸

Even in more recent years, Peckham's photographs are still being used as illustrations in books and newspaper articles on the town and surrounding area. *The Stroud News & Journal* frequently includes photographs by him.²⁹ Peter Gill in his book *Britain in Old Photographs - South Gloucestershire at War* refers specifically to Peckham in his introduction.³⁰ The book contains a number of photos taken by him during the war years depicting war-time life in the area.

HIS OTHER INTERESTS

Life was not all work and no play for Peckham. His interest in music continued. He was involved with the Stroud District Band.³¹ During WW2, he organized Sunday afternoon concerts to entertain the troops and locals at the Subscription Rooms, both giving piano recitals himself and arranging 'Celebrity Concerts'.³²

He played golf as a young man. According to the Cirencester Golf Club Visitors Book, he played golf there in 1910.³³ On a couple of occasions he was introduced by Dennis Moss, who was a member of the club. Both he and his wife Lillias played there on occasions after the War in 1920 & 1922. In later years he was a member of the Stroud bowling club.³⁴

EDWIN C. PECKHAM
The County Studio, Stroud
'PHONE 106
**PORTRAIT AND COMMERCIAL
PHOTOGRAPHER**

*Amateur Supplies
& Service*

Agent for
KODAK
SELO
AGFA
ZEISS
ENSIGN
VOIGTLANDER
PATHE
LEICA, Etc.



Throughout his years in Stroud, Peckham took a great interest in local affairs, involving himself in the community. He was a councillor, a member of the Stroud Urban District Council for 17 years for the Central Ward.³⁵ According to a newspaper report soon after Peckham's retirement, he had been an active member of the main committee of the Stroud and District Chamber of Trade as well as being chairman of one of the two sub-committees dealing with entertainments and publicity.³⁶ Twice he was its president.

The 1937-38 *Stroud and Mid-Gloucestershire Directory* lists him as one of the Stroud Group of School Managers. He was a member of the Rotary Club³⁷ and also a Freemason, a subscribing member of the Hicks-Beach lodge.³⁸

In WW2 he was Head Warden for the Uplands Ward (A-6), A.R.P. - Air Raid Precautions. One of the rooms at his home in Folly Lane was used as 'headquarters' for his unit. An account of the Civil Defence Services and A.R.P. in Stroud and Nailsworth is given in the book *Area Eight in the War against Hitlerism*.³⁹ Many of the illustrations in this book were contributed by Peckham, one of which is a photograph with the caption - "Head Wardens of Area 8 at the End of the War". "E.C. Peckham (A-6)" is sitting in the front row.

HE RETIRES

Edwin Peckham must have been a very energetic and active man. He did not retire at 65 like most other men, but waited until 1959, when he was 72 years old. The business was purchased by Mr. Eric J. Gardiner of Rodborough, who had for a number of years been working for him. Even then he did not retire completely, but for a time kept involved helping out the new proprietor getting established.

Later, around 1964, he and his wife moved to Essex to be near their daughter. He died on 11 February 1972 whilst living at Westcliffe-on-Sea, Essex.⁴⁰ Lillias continued to live there, but died in November 1984 at a nursing home in Portscatho, Cornwall.⁴¹

Even now, some 40 years after Edwin Peckham left the town, he is still remembered by many of the older folk. His photographic business continues, trading under "Peckhams of Stroud", although it now occupies half of the original shop. They still hold a large collection of his glass negatives, from which prints are produced to order. Such was his reputation and the impact he made during his years in Stroud.

References

¹ 1881 Census, RG11/2554 f57 p35.

² Gloucester Record Office (GRO): Marriage Register, Cirencester Parish Church, (fiche PFC 86 IN 1/15 No.3).

³ *Gloucester Journal*, 26 November 1887.

⁴ Separate research by the author.

⁵ GRO 486/2 - Admission Register.

⁶ Cirencester Library: Box E3-1-d.

⁷ *Cirencester and District Free Church Magazine*, March 1908.

⁸ *Stroud News & Journal*, 9 October 1959.

⁹ *Cirencester and District Free Church Magazine*, March 1910.

¹⁰ *Cirencester Congregational Church Record*, June & July 1912.

¹¹ Cirencester Library: Box A5-1-f.

¹² Cirencester Library: Box C1-1-z, & *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*, 13 April 1912.

¹³ *Cirencester Congregational Church Record*, January 1912.

¹⁴ *Stroud and District Directories*, 1920 onwards.

¹⁵ Eileen Davis: private communication, October 1994.

¹⁶ Mr & Mrs W.O. Tuck: private communication, October 1997.

¹⁷ General Register Office Marriage Index, June quarter 1921, Registration District - Conway.

¹⁸ General Register Office Birth Index, March quarter 1900, Registration District - Llanfyllin.

¹⁹ Ex member of staff, *Stroud News & Journal*: private communication, October 1997.

²⁰ General Registry Office Index, September quarter 1926, Registration District - Cirencester.

²¹ GRO & Gloucestershire Collection: Registers of Electors.

²² *Stroud and Mid Gloucester Directory* (c1922),

²³ *Stroud and District Directories*, 1952 & 1956.

²⁴ *Stroud and Mid Gloucester Directories* (1922 & 1929).

²⁵ *Stroud Official Guide* (post 1932),

²⁶ *Nailsworth News*, March 2002, Issue 20.

²⁷ Gloucester Library (GL), Gloucestershire Collection.

²⁸ GL, Gloucestershire Collection: Photographs - Ref.AO1.25.

²⁹ E.g. 21 February & 29 August 2001.

³⁰ (1995), Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, ISBN 0-7509-1133-6.

³¹ *Stroud News & Journal*, 9 October 1959.

³² Wilfred Merrett, private communication: October 1997.

³³ GRO: D7054 Box 9/1 Acc 7208.

³⁴ *Stroud News & Journal*, 9 October 1959.

³⁵ *Stroud and Mid-Gloucestershire Directory*, 1937-38 & *Stroud News & Journal*, 9 October 1959.

³⁶ Stroud Library: 'News clippings relating to the Stroud Area', Vol. 4 - *Stroud News & Journal*, 6 November 1964.

³⁷ *Stroud News & Journal*, 9 October 1959.

³⁸ GRO: D1815 Box 1/2 & 1/3.

³⁹ GRO: *Area Eight in the War against Hitlerism - being an account of the Civil Defence Services and ARP in Stroud and Nailsworth* by P.R. Symonds (1945), ref. R.O.L. F5/STRO.

⁴⁰ National Probate Calendar/Index, 1972.

⁴¹ National Probate Calendar/Index, 1984.