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Opening Extract from...

A Village Lost and Found:

Scenes in Our Village by T.R. Williams

An annotated tour of the celebrated 1850s stereo card series

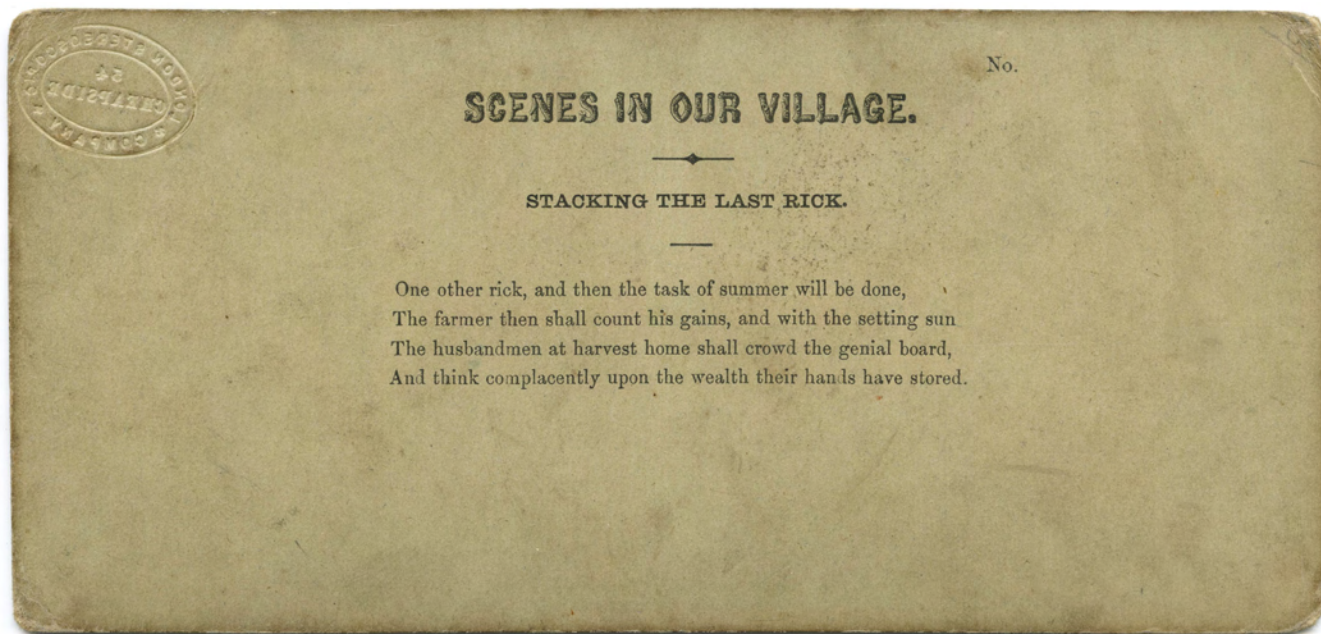
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Published by Frances Lincoln

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A life-size reproduction, front and back, of a typical *Scenes in Our Village* stereo card, just as it might fall into your hands.
This one is SIOV 27 'Stacking the Last Rick'.

INTRODUCTION TO *Scenes in Our Village*

To those readers who are well acquainted with the history of stereoscopic photography or with the work of T. R. Williams, we'd like to point out that the aim of this book is not to offer an in-depth study of those topics; it is simply to present this one photographic essay, the first of its kind, in its entirety, as it was originally conceived by its author. These “perfect stereoscopic gems” and their accompanying verses are the undisputed principal players in our show. However, we have added our own comments and the related information we have gathered, to add to the general enjoyment and understanding of the work.

T. R. Williams's masterpiece, *Scenes in Our Village*, is one of the most intriguing groups of stereo cards of all time, hitherto known only to a few devoted collectors. This book presents the whole series, card by card, in a form which is intended to give pleasure in exactly the same way as in the 1850s, but also provides the first comprehensive catalogue of the cards, with supplementary information on every scene, as revealed by our research. *Scenes in Our Village*, which we can conveniently refer to as SIOV, is a series of stereoscopic photographs taken in the first half of the 1850s, depicting rural life in an English village. We now know the village is Hinton Waldrist, in Berkshire in the 1850s, but, owing to boundary changes in the 1970s, at present to be found in Oxfordshire. Each carefully composed image, usually including some local characters, is accompanied by a dedicated verse, printed on the back of the card. In fact, these verses probably warrant the title ‘poems’ – since each one not only perfectly complements the photograph, but is complete in itself. The result is not only a valuable document of a bygone era, but also a work of intrinsic beauty. Williams documents a functional and beautiful village in its prime, and colours it with insights into the lives and ways of thinking of the villagers. He also hints at wider truths suggested by the scenes as symbols, and, by allowing us to see through a different set of eyes, gives us a gentle, thought-provoking comment on life.

The whole series of stereo cards comprises about 59 published views, but there are numerous variants and related views, which effectively bring the total number of ‘scenes’ to about 80. In addition, we have found that most of these exist in an ‘hi’ and a ‘lo’ viewpoint version (see page 20); so a truly full set, corresponding to every known original negative, would stretch to about 150 images. There is more: the cards are sometimes hand-coloured and sometimes not, and there are wide variations in the way that the single frames are cropped, from a negative which is about 50 per cent bigger in area than the print. The views also turn up in various different issues, with various blindstamps and labels, often identifying the retailer as well as the photographer. So it is possible to go on almost for ever, finding new features in these cards.

The SIOV views may have been sold initially directly from TRW's premises, but certainly a deal was done at some point with the London Stereoscopic Company, an emerging company at the time, which was later to become a huge commercial leader in the field of the production and retailing of stereoscopic views. It seems that agreements may have been made with other retailers too, to distribute *Scenes in Our Village* to a public with a growing appetite for TRW's work. The series was advertised in 1856 in current publications, and evidently became very successful, though there are noticeable differences in the numbers of cards of each title which survive to this day; some are quite frequently found, and some are extremely rare, perhaps an indication that some SIOV views were more popular than others.

Why did T. R. Williams create this series of views? This was an enterprise which must have required great dedication. It seems that Williams, in the prime of his life, a time of great energy and creativity, became impassioned with the idea of revisiting the village which had enchanted the summers of his childhood, and documenting an idyll which he felt was fast disappearing – the pure, innocent country life glimpsed in his perception, in his youth. The whole series bursts with the kind of passion that can only be born of a labour of love. While TRW's well-known *Crystal Palace* series may well have been performed in response to a commission, we feel that the *Scenes in Our Village* set was, in every part of its creation, a personal statement from T. R. Williams himself. We believe that TRW exposed and developed these pictures using a mobile dark room, on a number of trips down to Hinton Waldrist in the early 1850s. There are many clues in the images, and in the accompanying verses, as will become clear in this book.

The appearance of the cards

A typical card in the series, as shown on page 16, consists of two albumen prints, a stereo pair, mounted quite accurately, level and in line with each other, on the front (recto) of a buff-coloured backing card. On the back (verso) is printed the title of the series, the title of this particular view, and a verse which relates to the photograph. There is a small text caption at top right on the back ('No. '), which suggests that a card number was planned to be added, but we have never seen a number printed in this position.

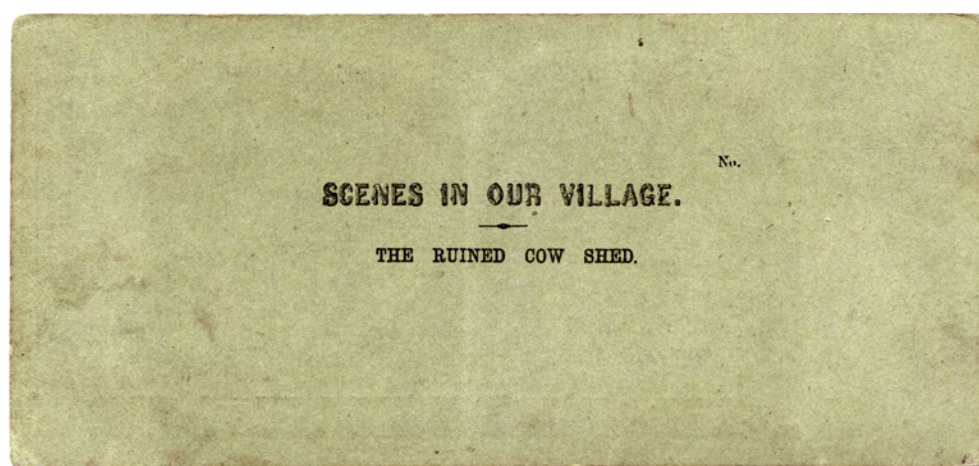
Very occasionally, though, a small blindstamped number appears on a SIOV card, but in the top right corner of the card as viewed from the *front*. An example can be seen in a version of SIOV 3 in our possession, which bears no fewer than four blindstamps, including this small numeral. Most of the stamped numbers we have seen do match our numbered version of the LSC list (page 26), but it seems that the congruence breaks down towards the end of the series. We would be grateful to hear about any such stamped numbers on SIOV cards, especially numbers above 40.



Blindstamps which appear on just one card.

Some surviving examples are very carefully and beautifully hand-tinted. In some other cases, especially cards which seem to be part of a later issue (typically on yellow card mounts), the colouring is less accurate, and much less appealing. Often it is the *untinted* cards which reveal the maximum detail. Not quite so carefully done, in the 1850s in general, was the positioning of the stereo window; in some cases the scene neatly fits behind the window ... in some cases not. Perhaps this was perceived as less important because, in most of the viewers of the day, the outside edges of the images visible were defined by the viewer rather than the card.

In the original issue, it seems that every card had a verse on the back, printed on the card itself, the series title appearing in a distinctive ‘rustic’ font with letters fashioned in the style of twigs. However, there are also some early-looking grey cards, with the back printed in the same style, but with no verse.



Verso with series title and scene title, but no verse.



Verso of a later SIOV card, with generic label, without scene title or verse.

Some either have no caption at all, or have a generic small label, pasted to the back of the card, bearing the title of the series only, in the rustic font. These views, mounted on yellow cards, for example, our SIOV 20a, ‘Gleaners and Children’, appear to have been manufactured later, long after the negatives had been taken over by the London Stereoscopic Company.

The printing of the verses is another example of TRW’s meticulous attention to detail; every dot, comma, line indentation, and even the characteristic full stop at the end of every title, is carefully placed, as can be seen in the reproductions of the card backs in the Detail Pages of this book. This latter little foible is surely one of TRW’s trademarks. Even the title of the series itself is invariably followed by a full stop. TRW’s version of a dash – as opposed to a hyphen – is often a very long

line. His colons and semicolons are separated from the words they follow by a space. His main font, incidentally, is quite similar to modern Times, except that the serifs at the top of letters such as 'l' and 'h' are straight lines as opposed to wedges. The 'rustic' lettering used for the series title is closely, though not exactly, approximated by the modern Pinewood font, as used on the front of this book.

Sometimes also seen on these cards is the original price – often written in pencil near one corner on the back. On the card shown on page 16, in the top right hand corner of the verso, is written '3/-' – three shillings, which was the going rate for an 'exquisitely coloured' view in 1856 (LSC Christmas catalogue). Untinted views were sold at about half this price. A coloured card represented a sobering two days' wages for the average labourer.

Technical notes on the stereo images

Careful examination of the images as stereo pairs reveals that the stereo effect is slightly exaggerated – the scenes are in fact *hyper-stereos*. We estimate the baseline, the distance between camera positions for the left and right exposures, to be about 8 inches – a little more than twice the average separation of the human eyes. A little extra evidence is needed to prove this – evidence which only a knowledge of the camera can provide (see TRW's Camera and Technique).

Another 'technical' observation which can easily be confirmed, simply by comparing left and right images in any of the views, is that, in addition to the differences caused by parallax (see Glossary), there are other small discrepancies between the images, which have arisen because objects moved in the moments between the left and right exposures; the stereos are not synchronous, but *sequential*. The discrepancies are most easily seen in the small movements of people, who were clearly asked to stay as still they could manage, but always twitched a little! But there are also many other tell-tale signs of sequentiality – for instance, the waving branches of trees, and the fluttering of clothing in the wind. We estimate the time between exposures to be of the order of a minute or two – just enough to cover and slide out an exposed plate from the back of the camera, replace it with another unexposed plate, remove the dark slide cover, and move the camera a few inches to one side, ready for the next exposure.

How long were the exposures? We think that TRW was working with wet collodion plates (see Glossary) to capture these views. Their sensitivity depended on the expertise and technique of the person who prepared the plates – normally the photographer himself. Williams seems to have been ahead of his time in the refinement of the relevant chemical processes; by 1855, he was able to capture images of the launching of HMS *Marlborough* from a moving boat – stereo photographs which 'froze' the waves on the water. We estimate that the exposure times for SIOV were of the order of a couple of seconds, at an aperture of about f/16.

An even more subtle detail is revealed by comparing many cards of the same view. We were able to discover that, strangely, most of the SIOV views come in two slightly different versions – taken from positions *one above the other*. Moreover, in an upper and lower view (which in this book we shall call the 'hi' and the 'lo' view), the two left images, and the two right images, taken in pairs, *do* seem to be synchronous! This was quite a shock. We were led to the inescapable conclusion that, to photograph *Scenes in Our Village*, TRW used a twin-lens apparatus, not as a regular stereo camera, but turned on its side with one lens directly above the other, and moved from side to side. We will return to this subject more than once. For further discussion, please see our section on TRW's Camera and Technique, which recounts in more detail the evidence we found, and our line of reasoning.

The verses

This is the first time that the complete text of the *Scenes in Our Village* verses has ever been published. The verses have a coherence and a uniformity of style which strongly suggest they were written by a single hand. It's noticeable that they are composed from the point of view of an affectionate frequent visitor – not from that of a resident, who would probably not see, for instance, the farming activities, as attractive or quaint. There is, however, an intimate knowledge of the workings of the village evident in the detailed descriptions of daily life, the names and characters of the villagers, and the round of the seasons in the country. In one verse (SIOV 10 'A Gossip by the Way'), the conversations of village folk are compared with those of city people – a comparison which might suggest itself to an observer who spent his time in both places. It seems likely that TRW himself wrote these verses; certainly they do not appear to have been imported from the work of any known published poetry of the period.

The verses show signs of having been written while actually studying the photograph to which they refer, or the scene directly; they are short and to the point, and in some cases (for instance, SIOV 25 'The Straw Yard'), items in the view are referred to directly. As we have remarked, the photographs appear to have been posed, as regards where the people stand, with a view to their being able to remain still for the two exposures required for the stereo view; and the disposition of objects which appear in the scene seems to be governed by a mixture of artistic placement and what was naturally present. So it is possible that the verses were written first, as a 'script' for the photographs. But we think it is more likely that the photograph came first.

The verses are seldom simply descriptive. TRW, if indeed it was he, is in almost every case commenting on Nature, or human behaviour, or the relationship between the two. He often remarks how a simple scene may reflect a broader pattern in life, or the Universe, or the Spiritual World. The poetry is often quite close to the spirit of haiku, in that it makes an observation, sees an action, and suggests a parallel thought. The verses are not moralistic, but gently sage and profound.

There are a number of references in the SIOV verses to the mortality of humans, life's brevity, and the continuity of the generations, for example, SIOV 7 'The Dame and her Spinning Wheel', 12 'Old Giles's Grind-stone', 21 'Gleaners Retiring', 39 'The Village Schoolmistress'.

It has been suggested to us that TRW's perception of the human race as part of Nature, and his fascination for the relationship of the material with the spiritual, have something in common with William Blake (1757–1827). As a point of interest, Blake was unusual in often illustrating his poems with his own drawings; TRW here illustrates his photographs with poetry. The work of Oliver Goldsmith was also very popular in TRW's time. Goldsmith (1728–74) was a writer who also expressed deep affection for the countryside, and nostalgia for the way it seemed in his youth. It's more than likely that Williams would have been familiar with his work. But a detailed discussion of TRW's relationship with the poetry of his time is beyond the scope of this book.

TRW's spiritual leanings are apparent in the verse to SIOV 5 'The Church Seen Through the Trees'. He speaks of "The sacred charm that binds my heart to thoughts of Thee". What was his religion? He was married in an Anglican church, and we have a letter written by TRW's son, in which he describes going to church on a trip to the West Country. But his verses do not speak the language of Church sermons; TRW seems to have a gentle, personal relationship with his God. In SIOV 34 'The First Warm Day in Spring', the text speaks of the innocence of the dreams of a sleeping baby, testament to TRW's evident belief in the innocence of children, a view directly opposed to that of his contemporary, Carlo Collodi, the writer of *Pinocchio*, who believed that virtue had to be drummed into a growing child. In fact this view of children as wild beasts in need of

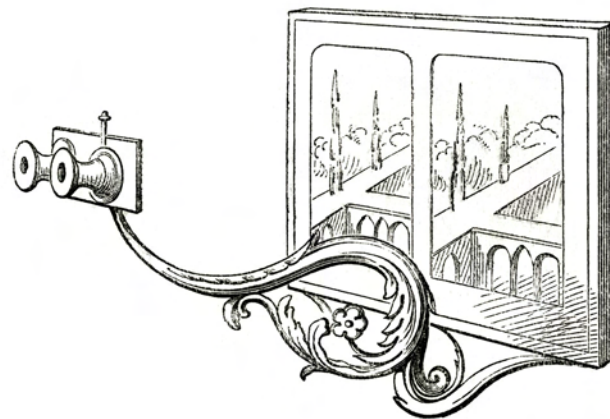
taming was prevalent much closer to home; in Victorian Britain, schooling was notoriously strict. TRW returns to his theme in SIOV 56 ‘Little Polly Gone Fast Asleep’:

“Sleep! While yet no sin, nor sorrow
In thy bosom makes a throe”

There are also many clues in the verses to TRW’s bonds with Hinton Waldrist – ‘Our’ Village. In SIOV 2 he refers to the Squire’s house (the Manor, as it is now known) quite directly, as his home; and in 40 ‘A View of Our Street’, he describes his feelings on returning to “The spot where once a boy I gambolled free”. This is again quite specific, and has a ring of truth.

Finally, SIOV 33 ‘Lane Leading to the Farm’, an important verse in every way, refers directly to the medium of stereoscopic photography, a trail which TRW is himself blazing:

“Thus, what is cultivation to the eye
Of the taught artist – stereoscopes supply.”



Format of ‘The Cards: Detail Pages’

The following section, the essential core of this book, presents the complete set of the *Scenes in Our Village* series, card by card, each in a double-page spread, numbered exactly as in the Gallery of Thumbnails (pages 26–7). Each view is represented by a single-frame, ‘half-stereo’ on the left-hand page, enlarged so it can be enjoyed as a ‘mono’ photograph; directly underneath this is usually a cropped version of the back of the card, showing the title and the accompanying verse. On the right-hand page appears a full-size reproduction of the face of the stereo card, and it is this that we hope you will be able to enjoy in three dimensions, by using the viewer supplied with the book or by free-viewing (see page 14). A brief description of the view with explanations of some of its features then follows, sometimes with a ‘zoomed-in’ detail stereo, or a comparable modern view, or some other visual item to illustrate a point. Occasionally we have departed from this format, particularly near the beginning of the series, and especially if the card in question appears in many variant forms. The main purpose of our text is simply to enhance the enjoyment of the stereo card itself, by maximising the direct contact between artist and audience, as originally intended by T. R. Williams. In many cases, we had more comments to make than would fit into one double-page spread. So, for those who wish to delve deeper into the meaning of any card, extra information will be found in the Further Notes pages near the back of the book, again arranged card by card. Much of our historical research, into the people and places relating to Hinton Waldrist, and to T. R. Williams himself, will be found in Further Notes.

Our policy for illustrations

For the sake of variety, for any particular view in the series, we have sometimes chosen not to derive all the illustrations from the same card. So, for example, in the case of SIOV 15 ‘Reaping’, the large ‘half-stereo’ illustration is from a hand-tinted card, but the full stereo is from an untinted version. The same applies to the ‘zoomed-in’ stereos, which we have created by cropping the original images.

We have adjusted the tonal range of our image scans to make best use of the colour printing employed in this book. We have also taken the liberty of gently editing them in the digital domain to remove some distracting effects of some of the damage to some of the cards, but we have stopped short of removing the natural effects of time on the prints. Essentially we wanted you to experience a quality close to that of the fine prints which T. R. Williams originally published, but also present the cards for real, just as they may be found in the 21st century. The original, untouched scans are all preserved in our archives, and are always available if questions arise as to what might have been lost or altered in our editing process. TRW was known to ‘spot’ his negatives to remove blemishes ... and was famous for his search for perfection. We are sure he would have loved the ‘clone’ tool, or ‘rubber stamp’ in Photoshop!

The convention we have adopted for captions is that titles given by T. R. Williams himself are shown in capitals, exactly as they appear on the original cards. All other titles, or additions to them, are shown in upper and lower case, and are, like the numbering system, our own invention. However, in the text, we have relaxed the convention, and titles are shown in a mixture of upper and lower case.

ON THE 1st OF DECEMBER, 1856.
SCENES FROM "OUR VILLAGE."

"So sweet a spot of earth, you might I ween,
 Have guessed some congregation of the elves
 To sport by summer moons had shaped it for themselves."

These pictures are perfect Stereoscopic "Gems," and no collection can be complete without them.

The Old Church.
 The Squire's House.
 The Fishpond.
 The Park Bridge.
 The Church through the Trees.
 The Road through our Village.
 The Dame and her Spinning Wheel.
 John Sims at his Pigstye.
 Maria Parson's Washing Day.
 A Gossip by the Way.
 Blacksmith's Shop.
 Old Giles's Grindstone.
 "The Cottage."
 Sowing Barley.
 Reaping.
 Reapers at Dinner in the Field.
 Loading the Wheat Cart.
 Rick Making.
 Going to School.
 The last Load—Gleaners waiting at the Gate.
 Gleaners Returning.
 Dick Carter's Potatoe Harvest.
 Lazy Joe Bennett's Hut.
 Taking Corn into the Granary.
 The Straw Yard.
 Loading the Dung Cart.
 Stacking the last Rick.
 A Rest by the Way.
 Dame Edmunds's talkative Daughter.

Old Daney enjoying his Pipe.
 A Chat at the Gate.
 The Ruined Cow Shed.
 Lane leading to the Farm.
 First warm day in Spring.
 The Old Story (at the Pump).
 Martha and Daniel at the Churn.
 Little Mary and her Magpie.
 Our Rectory.
 The Village Schoolmistress.
 A View of our Street.
 Turnpike to the Hamlet.
 Bread and Cheese in the Barn.
 Cottage on the Banks of the River.
 A View of the Bridge.
 The Weir.
 The Weir—Another View.
 The Ferry.
 Under the Willows.
 Angling in the Stream.
 "Where I catch the most fish."
 Anglers done for the day.
 The Cart Shed.
 The Remains of the Old Hall.
 "Tummus" standing for his Picture.
 The Doctor's One Cow Dairy.
 Little Polly gone fast to sleep.
 Drawing Water from the Well.
 The back view of Neal's Cottage.
 Mrs. Giles at her Pump.

The above are most exquisitely executed, and each has descriptive matter, or an appropriate quotation at back.

List of titles published as part of a London Stereoscopic Company advertisement in 1856.
 The titles do not always match those found on the cards themselves (e.g. 'Gleaners Returning', as opposed to 'Gleaners Retiring').
 Note that there is no reference to T. R. Williams as photographer.

A contemporary list of the series

The facing page shows a reproduction of the only known advertisement, by the London Stereoscopic Company (LSC), for a complete series of TRW's *Scenes in Our Village*. It appeared in 1856, by which time we believe that the cards had already had some success, published by TRW himself since the early 1850s. We have no explanation for the fact that this advertisement refers to 'Scenes *from* Our Village', when the series is invariably titled 'Scenes *in* Our Village' on the card backs – except that this may be one of many indications that the LSC did not place much importance on fulfilling the wishes of their artists. The company certainly sold large numbers of these cards in the 1850s and into the 1860s, slightly changing the format for each new edition; but they were not exclusively licensed to retail the series. This is the list on which we have based the cataloguing in this book; we have added card numbers for convenience, which follow the order in this advertisement ... and a few extra views not listed by the LSC at all.

A parallel resource to this book is to be found on our London Stereoscopic Company website, at www.LondonStereo.com. Within the section devoted to *Scenes in Our Village* is to be found a SIOV thumbnail gallery similar to the one on the following two pages, and a list of views. But in the website version, the titles or icons can be clicked to access pages with details of the card; these loosely correspond with the Detail Pages in this book.

Overleaf is our own reference gallery, the first ever published, of thumbnail images of all the known views of *Scenes in Our Village*. The Gallery provides a quick way of identifying a card; once its number in the series is ascertained, the view can then easily be found in the Detail Pages.

So now ... turn the page to begin a virtual journey into a vanished world, a world where time moves a little more slowly than we are used to ...