

Adding another dimension



*3D images were by far the most popular format of photograph around 1860. Often the earliest photographic records we have of historic houses are three-dimensional stereoscopic images, known as stereoviews. Photography historian and collector **Dr Peter Blair**, author of *Scotland in 3D — A Victorian Virtual Reality Tour*, takes us on an usual journey with the help of the nineteenth-century craze.*

Practically every Victorian middle-class home in Britain could boast a stereoscope, a device used to view 3D stereoview cards. Before the advent of the television, this 'virtual reality' experience was a keystone of family entertainment and education, with stereoviews available on most subjects imaginable, from war to celebrity, religion to sport. Topographical views — landscapes and the built environment — were the most popular topics. Stereoviews were cheap and convenient souvenirs, sold in stations, on ferries, and at attractions like castles and abbeys — as ubiquitous as the postcard would become fifty years later.

The experience of revisiting these places in three dimensions from the comfort of our armchairs still impresses and delights us today, even with all the technical wizardry to which we have become accustomed. It is hardly surprising that the special effect became so popular with Victorians.

What is more surprising, perhaps, is that despite being the basis for modern VR headsets, this Victorian technology is now almost forgotten.

Blair Weno Stereo-camera c.1890



Our two eyes each provide us with a view from a slightly different perspective, which our brains combine into a 3D construct of the world around us. Sir Charles Wheatstone first explained this phenomenon scientifically in the 1830s, and to illustrate his theory developed a device to demonstrate that two flat images, drawn from slightly different perspectives, could be recombined by the brain into a 3D image. He called his invention a stereoscope.

Stereoscopes work by ensuring that our left eye only sees the left image and our right eye only sees the right image (the simplest

possible versions look like a pair of spectacles with a divider attached extending perpendicular to the face, to prevent each eye from 'peeking' at the image intended for the other). Our brain does the rest, interpreting the difference in viewpoint as distance from the scene portrayed, and creating the corresponding perception of depth.

Photography came hot on the heels of Wheatstone's experiments, and stereo-cameras (incorporating two lenses, a similar distance apart to our eyes) were soon developed. A compact stereoscope, first exhibited to a wide public at the

Great Exhibition of 1851, sold half a million in just five years, helping to create a standard format for stereoviews. The mania reached its height around 1860, though after a downturn in the 1870s popularity recovered to a second peak around 1900.

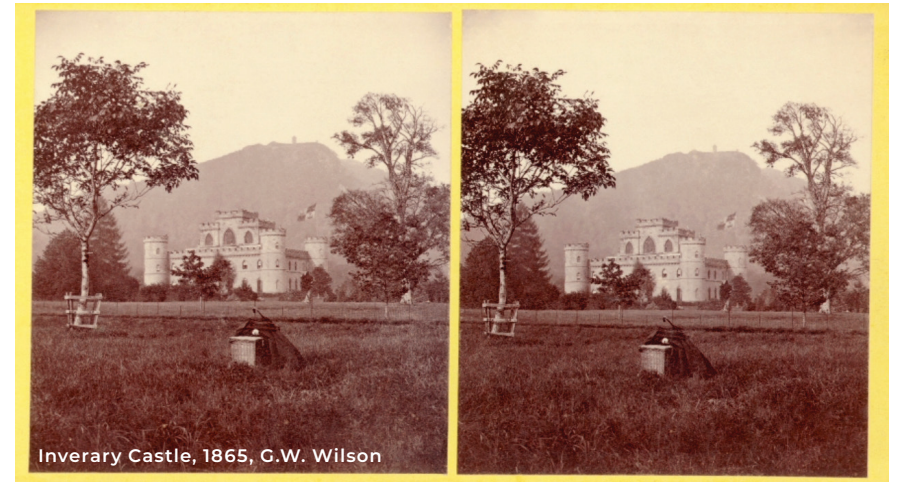
When Queen Victoria and Albert built **Balmoral Castle** in the 1850s, they employed an Aberdeen photographer, George Washington Wilson, to record the building work. He formed a good rapport with the Queen and became her favourite photographer in Scotland. Informed by his prior training as an artist, Wilson's beautiful compositions of Scottish scenery became the benchmark for other photographers. He was renowned for his technical innovation, pushing the boundaries of photographic technique and equipment, perfecting the earliest instantaneous views, for example. He often visited Balmoral, where he was even provided the use of a cottage on the estate for his family holidays. Wilson's view of Balmoral was taken around 1860. The castle looks brand new, with the garden still very immature.



Wilson toured Britain extensively, from Land's End to John o'Groats, but the majority of his images are of Scotland. In 1863, Wilson's stereoview catalogue featured 440 titles, rising to over 2,700 by the 1890s. A view of **Inverary Castle** from 1865 shows Wilson's photographic equipment and chemicals in a basket in the foreground, draped in his darkroom tent. The shot captures the castle before its third storey and the distinctive pointed turrets were added after a fire in 1877.

The abundantly stocked greenhouse at **Drumlanrig Castle** provides insights into the plants that were being grown in Victorian times. Historic stereoviews offer invaluable insights into the appearance of properties and the layouts of grounds and gardens more than a century and a half ago.

Drumlanrig Castle Greenhouse, c.1860. The picture is likely by Ballantine of Cumnock, who advertised stereoviews of Drumlanrig in the Ayr Advertiser of April 1861.



Sir Walter Scott's study, c.1865, Lennie. The room was preserved much as Scott left it at his death in 1832, and remains essentially identical today



For example, this stereoview by an anonymous photographer shows how the garden at **Levens Hall**, Cumbria — now world-famous for its topiary — looked around 1860. The renowned and long-lived yews are already well-established.

Early stereoscopic photography is a huge, underutilised resource for researchers of the Victorian era. But with the latest smart phones now boasting the ability to take 3D Images of their own, might we see the technique recover its position as the preminent photographic format?

Dr Blair's book is reviewed in The Library on page XX. It comes with a handy stereoscope attached, for easy viewing of the images within.



Floors Castle, in a rare early stereoview c.1856 by André Orange, a French photographer based in Edinburgh

